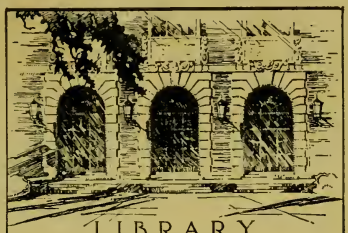
A Great Platonic Friendship

W. Dutton Burrard



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A GREAT PLATONIC FRIENDSHIP.

VOL. II.

A GREAT

PLATONIC FRIENDSHIP

BY

W. DUTTON BURRARD

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON:
HURST AND BLACKETT, LIMITED,
13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.
1887.

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A GREAT PLATONIC FRIENDSHIP.

CHAPTER I.

GRAFTON'S LETTER.

It is past two by the time that Grandby has toiled up the Banbury ascent, and consequently, on entering the hotel, he finds the breakfast-room deserted. He orders luncheon, and takes his seat, resting his head in his hands, for he feels tired after his long walk. A servant presently enters, and hands him a letter, which, he says, has been two days in Doonga, wandering from hotel to hotel. On seeing the well-known handwriting of George Grafton, he eagerly seizes it, and tears it open.

'My dear Frank,

'I was very glad to receive your letter announcing your safe arrival, and I hope sincerely that the mountain air has already braced you up. That Indian fever is a very loathsome thing; it seems to become so fond of its victim that there is no driving it away, and for months and months it clings about the system, awaiting an opportunity to appear again. So mind you take care of yourself, old boy, and run no risks. Those mountain mists are very treacherous things, and should certainly be avoided by one who has just recovered from such a sharp attack as you have had.

'You ask me for the probable date of my appearance in Doonga, and I wish to goodness I could give you a definite answer to your question; but at present everything regarding my immediate future is unsettled. In all probability I shall not get more than a fortnight's leave at the most. At the present moment we are working day and night, and I am quite sure that my chief cannot spare me yet. However, in a week we ought to have completed the most critical portion of the

work, and then I shall seriously speak to him upon the subject, also suggesting that he, for his own sake, should take a spell of rest. He is such a dear old man, so kind and thoughtful, and so indefatigable in his exertions. I am quite certain, if I were to ask him for leave now, that he would grant it me in spite of the extra work my absence would entail upon him. But, of course, I should never think of doing such a thing, for, in reality, it is far more essential that he should go on leave than that I should, for the Indian climate, I am truly thankful to say, seems powerless to injure me in any way.

'You may imagine the pride I take in this work. The fortress is rapidly rising, and my brain is occupied from morning till night planning slopes, parapets, and caponiers. I am glad that the government have at last awoken to the fact of the danger they are running in having this great arsenal protected merely by a mud parapet, across which the pariah dogs can run with the greatest facility. I cannot understand the apathetic indifference which they have displayed in this respect all these years. Does it not strike you as

extraordinary that this arsenal, which has to supply the whole province with warlike stores, should be utterly undefended, and totally disconnected from any line of railway. Their knowledge of strategy must be indeed limited if they imagine total isolation to be a source of strength. However, they really do appear to be coming to their senses at last, for, besides the order for the building of this fort, there are rumours current of a line of railway being made as soon as possible. That river Sutlej will be an awful obstacle—I wish that they would let me engineer the job.

'And now, enough of shop! There is something else, even more important, if possible, than my work, which I wish to talk to you about. My dear Frank, I have a confession to make to you which, if I think rightly, will startle you not a little. What would you say, old boy, if I were to tell you that I am actually engaged to be married?'

Grandby removes his eyes from the letter with a look of the blankest amazement depicted on his face. He could not have read aright—his eyes must have deceived him! George engaged to be

married—it seems an utter impossibility!

He eagerly raises the letter and continues its perusal.

'Would you be much astonished? I am quite sure you would—and yet it's the truth, and what is more my engagement is no new thing, but dates back from March 10th. You see, I remember the date, and I have cause to do so, for I am bound by a solemn promise to my *fiancée* not to divulge the secret till six months have passed from that day. On September 10th—in about three weeks' time—my secret will be a secret no longer, but will lie open to the whole world. Are you very angry with me for having kept you so long in ignorance of this important occurrence? It is the first secret that I have ever withheld from you, and many and many a time have I longed to confide in you, and to hear your friendly words of sympathy. But my promise prevented me from doing so, and even now I feel that I am hardly justified in mentioning the fact.

'Ah! Frank, I am so happy—so madly happy! The whole world seems bright and lovely to my captivated senses. There is no joy equal to that of loving and

being loved in return by a pure young girl. Often I recall the day when I poured out my love, lingering over every little detail of the scene. She was so shy, and blushed so prettily—and she was so surprised at my avowal. At first I could not make her understand that I was thoroughly in earnest—she said that, though she had often thought of *me*, she had never imagined that I cared for her—that nothing in my manner had ever given her cause to suspect such happiness. And she was right in this respect, for my great love had made me reserved rather than ardent in her presence. And then it was that she made me promise to keep the thing secret for six months!

'She said she believed that it must be only a passing fancy on my part, and nothing that I could say would convince her to the contrary. "No," she said, in her pretty, imperious way. "You must let me have my own way. Let me be sure of your earnest love. For six months from this date we must hold no communication whatever. If I am living here, you must not speak to me, and, if I go away, you must not write. When the six months

have passed, if you have not changed your mind, come and fetch me; if you find that your love was but an idle fancy, keep away —and I shall understand. It would be much better to be certain of the reality of our love, before we consent to bind ourselves together to eternity."

'Ah! Frank it was very hard to consent to her demand, for I was *positive* as to the nature of my love for her. But, of course, I yielded in the end, for I could not help admiring the noble idea which actuated her in her request. And, so from that date to this, I have never spoken or written to her one word. I have kept my promise faithfully, and I only allow myself to confide to you these particulars, now that the day of my release is drawing near. Even now, I will not tell you what her name is! In a few weeks you will know, and I shall have my darling in my arms my acknowledged bride-elect. Ah! to think that she could doubt my love! It grows and grows every day, and has become the passion of my life. Write to me, dear Frank, and tell me that you wish me every happiness in life, and believe, me now as always, your affectionate friend,

'GEORGE GRAFTON.

'P.S.—Tell me all about yourself—what are you doing all this time? Describe to me the inmates of the hotel—have you met anyone you like, and have you seen any pretty girls? You know how glad I shall be to hear any details connected with your daily life!'

Grandby eats his lunch with little appetite. The news which he has received has deprived him of all desire for food. The idea of George's engagement seems so impossible to him that he can hardly believe it now, with the written statement in his hand.

He tries to analyse his feelings on the subject. Is he glad at hearing the announcement of the great change about to take place in his friend's life? No, selfish though it seems, he cannot acknowledge to feeling glad. His love for his friend is so great that he cannot repress the feeling of jealousy which arises in his heart at the thought of another having stepped in between them. Henceforth he can be as nothing to his friend! New ties will arise around him in consequence of his marriage, and gradually they will drift apart, and become as strangers to one another!

This idea is very painful to him, and he rises hastily and walks over to his own little hut. In his present state of mind, he feels that it is absolutely necessary for him to be alone.

How can he bring himself to write his congratulations, when his heart feels sore and aggrieved? How can he show kindly sympathy, when he knows that the event will rob him of his friend? For, even should they still remain in friendship, they can henceforth never hold to one another the same loving relationship which has lasted for so many years. *That* must inevitably die! With a wife and home and possibly children around him to occupy his love and attention, their romantic affection for one another must of a necessity be extinguished. Yes—the sooner he can bring himself to fully grasp that fact, the better it will be for him.

He rises, and paces the room backwards and forwards with an impatient stride, bitterly reproaching himself for his present behaviour. He feels it to be contemptible and unworthy of him; his one thought is the loss which he himself will sustain by his friend's engagement; his one idea is *self*.

Why can he not forget *himself*, and regard the situation from George's point of view? Why should he grudge his friend his new-found happiness? In doing so, is he acting up to the love which he professes to bear towards him?

'I cannot do it!' he cries, clasping his hand to his forehead in his agitation. 'The thought of what I shall lose swamps every other feeling. Oh! how thoroughly I despise myself! This is not love, affection; it is merely the basest form of egotism.'

He dares not in his present mood attempt to write a reply, for fear lest his feelings on the subject should make themselves apparent, so he determines to postpone the evil moment until he has become more composed in mind. His clock points to the quarter before four, so, seizing his hat and stick, he leaves the house to keep his appointment with Miss Forsdyke.

He experiences a yearning to confide his anxiety to some one, and he resolves to tell Miss Forsdyke all, feeling assured of her ready sympathy. And, besides this, the thought strikes him that possibly she may be able to throw some light upon the matter. She lives at Sihayipur, the station

at which George is quartered, and probably she knows him, and may be able to make some conjecture as to the personality of his intended. This idea somewhat raises his dejected spirits, and he hastens his pace in the direction of the wood.

As he emerges into the open from the long avenue of beech-trees, he comes face to face with Loftus. The Dictator of the Doonga Club is lolling indolently on the back of a roan country-bred, which is proceeding at a gentle walk, and the animal's head is stretched down to the ground, sniffing for something good to eat, and occasionally pausing to take a nibble at a tuft of grass upon the roadside. The wearied expression on his face somewhat disappears as he catches sight of Grandby, and there is really an approach to animation in his glance, as he extends his arm and shakes him by the hand.

'Hullo!' he cries. 'Glad to see you, Grandby! out for another constitutional walk, eh?—and merely for walking's sake, and with no hope of catching a glimpse of a petticoat. Well, as I have remarked before, you're a rum cove, and there is no denying the fact. Where have you been

hiding yourself these last three days? I had given you up for dead and buried.'

'Well, you might have come, and looked me up,' says Grandby, smiling.

'Not if I know it, my boy!' he answers, with a sly wink. 'You won't find Vernon Loftus in the vicinity of Banbury's Hotel, if he can help it! Not a bit of it—I am too old and wary a bird to enter into that celestial sphere. Old Mother-Medusa Stockton is alone sufficient to keep an army at a respectful distance.'

'Well, I will come and look you up to-morrow morning. I have something particular to ask you!'

'Right you are, my boy! Is it anything about Miss Forsdyke?'

'About Miss Forsdyke!'

Grandby literally starts back in his astonishment. What on earth does Loftus mean? Can it be possible that he has obtained an inkling into their secret meetings? He is conscious that his face is growing very red under his friend's curious scrutiny, but he attempts to laugh the matter off.

'About Miss Forsdyke?' he says, with well-affected surprise. 'What a most ex-

traordinary idea! What *could* I have to ask you about Miss Forsdyke?'

'Oh—nothing, nothing,' replies Loftus, indifferently, an amused expression working his good-natured face. 'It was only a surmise of mine—nothing more. It is a peculiar fact I have noticed that everyone who makes the acquaintance of that young lady desires, as a rule, to ask a question or two before a week has elapsed. And they generally come to me for information. Why, I do not know, for I am certainly not Miss Forsdyke's keeper. That was all! I am delighted to think that I was wrong, for it proves to me that you are not on terms of dangerous intimacy with her—or else, it would be inevitable that you would follow the usual practice. However, I shall be very glad to see you, and, ahem! —give you the benefit of my advice.'

'Then I will come about eleven.'

'Very well, at eleven—I shall probably be in bed, but you are not a stickler for ceremony, I know—and now, as you seem in a hurry to be off, I will wish you a fond good-bye.'

'Yes, I think I must be going,' says Grandby, hurriedly. 'It is getting very

late, and I have something very particular —I mean I—I—I am rather afraid of the mountain mist when the sun goes down.'

'Ah! that's right, my boy,' says Loftus, gravely. 'Always be careful of your health, and wear flannel next to your skin. Don't go sitting about on the grass. Take my advice, *and make her walk about;*' at which sally he laughs quite heartily for him, and turns his pony's head in a homeward direction.

They separate, and, on looking round a moment or two afterwards, Loftus finds that Grandby has disappeared; he has, in fact, turned off the main road, and is already hidden from view by the projecting ridge of rock.

'What a *very* peculiar road to choose for constitutional exercise!' he mutters, with a chuckle of the keenest relish. 'He's a deep one, is young Grandby! 'Pon my life, he nearly took me in the other day about walking for walking's sake. His face is so deucedly in his favour—if he says a thing, one can't help being convinced as to its truth. Wonder who the nymph is? I hope, by all that's holy, that it is not the fair Diana! He certainly blushed

when I made mention of her name. I make it a rule never to spoil other people's sport, but, holy Habbakuk! if she tries on her game with that young chap, I will put a good thick spoke in her wheel. Mrs. Potiphar was a mere child to what she is, when once she gets infatuated, and, if not for his own sake, for his sister's sake, I will see that no harm comes to him.'

Thus ruminates the Dictator, as his pony slowly carries him in the direction of his stables, and there is a look of fierce determination on his face which seems to denote that, for once in his life, he is thoroughly in earnest.

CHAPTER II.

MUTUAL CONFIDENCES.

MEANWHILE Grandby is pursuing his way through the silent wood, cogitating thoughtfully on Loftus' last remark. In spite of its sharp significance, he does not attach to it much importance, feeling assured that it was a mere guess, spoken in jest. But still he cannot shake off the very uncomfortable feeling that Loftus' wits have been sharp enough to penetrate through his flimsy equivocation ; and the fact impresses upon him that it will require all his energy and strength of mind to sustain that which is so foreign to his nature—dissimulation.

He finds Miss Forsdyke waiting for him beneath the oak, and she advances towards him with a pout upon her lips. She is looking very lovely on this autumn afternoon, in spite of the look of half-annoyance

on her face, and he eagerly scans her *petite* form, drinking in the full wealth of her wondrous beauty with an ardent eye.

'What is the matter?' he says, softly, taking her by the hand. 'Are you angry with me, Diana?'

'Angry? For what reason?'

'For having so forgotten myself when we parted yesterday. I ought not to have—have allowed my lips to touch your face, perhaps—you hurried away so quickly that I fancied you might have been offended.'

'Oh, Frank, how could you think such a thing?' she asks, raising her eyes to his face in innocent wonder. 'What harm could there possibly be in your taking a brother's kiss? No, no—I am not angry with you, but—but I must confess,' she adds, with an entrancing smile, 'that I was feeling just a *little* injured when you appeared. Do you know that it is nearly half-past four? Why is it that you are so late?'

'I am so very sorry if I have kept you waiting,' he says, earnestly. 'The truth is, I have had a very busy day. First I went to church, and, after service, I strolled down to the cemetery, and, on arriving home, I

found a letter which gave me cause for much reflection—and then again, on coming here, I met Mr. Loftus, and he again detained me.'

'Mr. Loftus!' she cries, with a slightly scared expression. 'Are you acquainted with Mr. Loftus?'

'Surely you cannot be unaware of that fact, Diana,' he answers, smiling. 'It is to Loftus that I owe my introduction to you.'

'Ah! true,' she says, 'I had forgotten. But—but he did not see you coming here?'

There is a ring of real anxiety in her tones, and he hastens to set her mind at rest.

'I met him in the open road,' he says, 'and he could not possibly have guessed which way I was going. Believe me, Diana, I have your welfare too much at heart ever to act thoughtlessly with regard to you.'

'I know you have,' she says, warmly, bestowing on him a glance which thrills him to the bone, 'I—I know that we—are doing no actual harm by meeting here, but still we ought to be very careful. And, of all people in the world, I should not like Mr. Loftus to know!' she adds, slowly.

'You know him very well, don't you?'

'Why? What makes you think so?' she asks, quickly. 'Has he been talking about me to you?'

'Yes—he has mentioned your name,' answers Grandby, hesitatingly, the remarks which Loftus has just made regarding her still ringing in his ears; 'and—and I concluded that you knew him well.'

'Yes, I know—or rather used to know him pretty intimately,' she answers, slowly, turning away her head. 'But we were never great friends. I must confess that I do not like his character, and I am afraid that he is aware of the fact, for I know instinctively that he bears me no good-will. I hope, Frank, that—that, if he says anything about me, you will not allow yourself to be prejudiced against me.'

'What an idea!' he cries, with a reassuring laugh. 'I can quite understand your objection to Mr. Loftus' character—it is not the sort of one to please a girl. For my own part, I like the man—but, Diana, you must not think so badly of me as to imagine that I should be influenced in the least by anything he said. I understand him well, and should never put much

faith in any of his absurdities. You must try to trust me more than that.'

He looks down at her with a fond reproachful glance, and she nestles towards him and slides her hand into his.

'Oh, Frank,' she says, 'I am so happy.'

'Supposing we sit down, as yesterday,' he says, after a moment's silence. 'I have something particular to talk to you about.'

'What—another idea!' she exclaims, with a pretty little laugh. 'My poor little head will become quite addled with all this learning. Sit down and tell me all about it, and don't be angry if I cannot understand it quite.'

'No, it is not another idea,' he says, seating himself beside her and feeling rather vexed, in spite of himself, at her joking allusion to what he, in his heart, regards as a sacred subject. 'I merely wish to confide in you a portion of my life. I wish to ask your advice, knowing that you will lend me a sympathetic ear.'

'Very well, Frank—I am all attention,' she says, viewing him critically with an amused smile playing across her features. 'Fire away, as the vulgar say!'

'You see,' he says, in an explanatory

way, 'I think that, in order to place our friendship on a firm basis, we ought to confide in one another something of our past and present lives. It is impossible for two people to be firm friends if their personal surroundings be totally unknown to one another. Don't you agree with me?'

'Certainly I do,' she answers, softly. 'As you say, it would be quite impossible. I, for my part, have not much to tell you beyond what you know already. You know that my father is a colonel in the commissariat, quartered at Sihayipur, and you also know,' she continues, with a sad smile, 'that, unfortunately for me, he does not understand my character, and that consequently I am treated harshly. You also know that it is my misfortune to have no mother. Had she not died, my life would have been a very different one from what it is. Since that sad day, I have had no kind parent to guide my wayward footsteps.'

She pauses with a little sigh, gazing abstractedly on the ground.

'But it is no good regretting what can't be helped,' she continues, with a faint attempt to shake off her sudden depression

of spirits, 'I suppose that we are not intended to be miserable in this world. We are given one life, and only one, and it is our duty to make it happy. If one were never to forget one's griefs and sorrows, one would never enjoy a single moment's happiness, for there is more sadness than joy in a human life. I have no mother, but I ought to be thankful that I possess a near relation to care for me and love me, though certainly Mrs. Renfrew is sometimes very trying;' and she looks towards him with a sad smile lingering on her lips.

'Have you been acquainted with Mrs. Renfrew all your life?' he asks, with interest.

'Oh, no!' she says. 'I never met her till this year. She has been for years in India, and I only left England four years ago. I was born out here, but my mother could not stand the climate, and when I was quite a little girl she took me home. When she died, I came out here to live with my father—I was then seventeen. But I have never met my aunt till the spring of this year. My father could not get his leave this year, so when the hot weather came on I was sent to

Mrs. Renfrew. We have been at Dalhousie all the summer, but it did not agree with my aunt's *nerves*, so we came on here, arriving shortly before you did.'

'Then you were practically a stranger to your own father?'

'Yes, he had been living for years alone, almost unconscious of my existence, and my appearance naturally upset his mode of living. Perhaps that was the reason why he never seemed to take to me.'

'You are certainly very strangely situated,' he says, sympathisingly. 'For, as I understand, you are not happy with Mrs. Renfrew either.'

'No—I am not happy,' she murmurs, slowly. 'I am happier though now that Colonel Renfrew has gone down to the plains; although he was my uncle, I really could not stand him. His uncouth manners and horrid gluttony inspired me with a disgust which I could not overcome. Perhaps I ought not to complain. Mrs. Renfrew *is* far from well, in spite of her absurd exaggerations as to the state of her health, and she is naturally a trifle irritable, and I really ought to be very grateful that I have *anyone* to live with.'

Every word she speaks impresses him more and more with the utter loneliness of her life, and he bends slightly forward and tells her of his great sympathy for the sadness of her lot, exhorting her to bear up bravely against the antagonistic forces surrounding her.

'I will—I will,' she says, raising her large eyes gratefully towards him. 'The knowledge of your friendship and sympathy inspires me with a new-born strength which I was never conscious of before.'

'And what year was it that you were in Doonga before?' he asks, after a slight pause.

'In Doonga before?' she repeats, with a startled look. 'How do you know that I was in Doonga before?'

He laughs amusedly at the peculiarity of her manner.

'Don't be frightened, Diana!' he says. 'There is nothing uncanny in my knowledge. On our first meeting here, in describing to me the secluded character of this wood, you mentioned the fact yourself.'

'Ah! of course!' she says, with something like an expression of relief, 'I was really doubtful as to your being a wizard

or something dreadful, when you suddenly asked the question. Of course I told you! How could I have been so stupid as to have forgotten the fact! I was here for a few weeks in the summer of 1880, three years a go, with my father. But we did not stay long—my father did not like the place, so we went away. But now I have told you everything,' she says, hastily changing the subject, 'it is your turn now, so kindly begin at the beginning, and spare no details.'

A mischievous twinkle sparkles in her eye, and she settles herself down comfortably to listen to his recital.

'But tell me first,' he says, 'something which rather puzzles me. You remember when I first met you by that tree outside the hotel?'

'Yes.'

'Well, do you know the impression that I derived from that short glimpse was that you were the happiest girl alive—that you were literally made of laughter. It has always struck me that your conduct then was—was so—so inconsistent with what I have observed in you since.'

She leans back on the grass and gives

vent to a long ripple of soft laughter.

'My dear Frank,' she says, bending towards him, 'you really must not judge my character from that one short glimpse, although I confess that I am by nature light-hearted. You presented such a lamentable picture, leaning against that tree, how could I help being amused? Of course,' she adds, hastily, 'I was very much concerned about you until you spoke to me, and told me that you were all right. And then when you made that *gauche* remark, telling me "not to go," and looking so shy and shame-faced in consequence, how could I prevent myself from laughing? But really, Frank, you must not think that I am always so melancholy as I have been for the last few days. Had I been differently situated in life, I believe I should have been the very essence of fun and laughter. You see, as yet we have always spoken on doleful subjects, and so you have only seen the gloomy side of my character. In the next few weeks you will find that I can laugh and joke as well as any other girl. The very fact of my possessing a real friend makes me happy.'

'Well, I shall regard that remark in the

light of a promise,' he says, smiling at her impetuosity. 'And, now that that important point is settled, let us turn to the business in hand.'

'Yes, begin at the beginning, please. Tell me first all particulars connected with your grandpapa, and then we can work gradually down to the present time.'

'Oh—come, Diana!' he answers, laughing, 'I never bargained for that.'

'Very well then—we will leave the old gentleman out of the question, since you wish it. Begin at the next generation. As you seem doubtful on the subject, I will catechise you, and mind—no fibs, sir! The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth!'

For the next quarter-of-an-hour they are busily engaged in extracting and imparting information. Grandby tells her freely of his life. He describes his home, near Canterbury, dwelling fondly on the person of his widowed mother, and he relates all details concerning himself which he fancies may be possibly interesting to her to hear. On one subject he is more reserved; he merely states the fact that he once possessed a sister, and that she

died, without giving any particulars with regard to her life or death. He fully intends at some later period to tell her all, but in his present state of mind, with the memory of the cold slab of marble still in his thoughts, he dare not venture upon such a painful subject; and, besides this, he shrinks from lowering Miss Forsdyke's unusually high spirits by the introduction of such a melancholy topic of conversation.

She certainly is in a brighter mood today, and it is with a sense of pleasure that he notes the fact, for he feels that his first resolve to make her happier is already bearing fruit. She sits there beside him, propounding questions of the most ridiculous nature, laughing heartily at his good-natured protests, and refusing to modify in the least the severity of her cross-examination.

'You know, sir,' she says, archly, 'you said yourself that friendship was impossible without the existence of a perfect confidence, so there is no eluding the difficulty. You had better make up your mind at once to answer all or nothing, for I shall not be satisfied with a part. You really mean to tell me that you have never been

in love? You mean to say that those *beaux yeux* of yours have never made the least impression on the heart of any girl?'

'Now you are really asking me what I cannot possibly answer,' he says, in laughing expostulation. 'To your first question, as to whether I have ever been in love, I repeat my unequivocal denial. As to the second part of your question, I really cannot say. I can only modestly affirm that to the best of my knowledge I have never made the least impression on any maiden heart. Girls are much too matter-of-fact and sensible in these days to fall in love.'

'Oh! that's your opinion, is it? I suppose that your twenty-three years' experience entitles you in your own opinion to give utterance to remarks of such preternatural wisdom.'

'Certainly I do. Outside of a romance, love is a very prosaic commodity.'

There is a pause. Miss Forsdyke, with a trace of colour on her cheeks, is regarding him curiously, with no intention, apparently, of breaking the silence, so he seizes on the opportunity to introduce the subject uppermost in his mind.

'Diana,' he says, slowly, 'are you acquainted with George Grafton?'

In a moment every vestige of colour deserts her, and a scared expression settles on her face, for which he is at a loss to account.

'How you startled me!' she exclaims, with a forced laugh. 'My thoughts were so far away that your sudden question brought me to the consciousness of my surroundings with a most unpleasant jerk. George Grafton—George Grafton—let me see—but why do you ask?'

'Only that he is my greatest friend on earth, and I thought that you may possibly have met him at Sihayipur.'

'Ah! yes—of course!' she cries, with a sudden recollection. 'You mean the young engineer. Yes, of course I know him, but only slightly; he doesn't mix much in society, if I remember rightly. And he is your greatest friend, is he?'

'My very, very greatest friend,' he replies, with warmth. 'We have been Damon and Pythias to one another for years and years. I really believe that it is my love for him that has prevented me from entertaining any warm regard for your fair sex.'

'How curious!' she murmurs, in a musing tone.

'What is curious?' he says, quickly.

'Curious!—did I say that it was curious? Oh, I only meant the fact that your great friend should be living in the same station as I am, and that I should know him slightly. The world is very small. Yes, I remember him exactly—a tall, upright man, with a long fair moustache.'

'Yes, that is he!' cries Grandby, eagerly. 'I am so glad that you are acquainted with him. To me he is an endless topic of conversation—I am never tired of discussing him. He is the most noble man on earth.'

'He is certainly nice-looking,' she answers, smiling at his warmth. 'As to the nobility of his character, I really am not in a position to judge, not knowing him well enough to be capable of giving an opinion.'

'Oh! but believe me, Diana, it is noble,' he says, earnestly. 'In my opinion there is no man in the world to equal him. I would rather die than lose his friendship. And to-day I have heard some news which makes me very anxious.'

'What is that?' she asks, quickly.

'I have heard that he is going to be married, and I cannot repress'

'What do you say?' she cries, seizing him by the arm. 'George Grafton going to be married! Who could have told you that?'

'He told me it himself,' he answers, not noticing the sudden fierceness in her tones. 'I heard from him to-day, and he said he had been engaged upwards of six months, and that he is bound by an oath to keep the matter a secret.'

'And yet he told you!' she says, in a sudden whisper.

'You must not blame him for doing that. He merely told me the bare fact, without any details of any sort. I do not even know the lady's name; and I thought that possibly you might be able to assist me, for, from what he says, I gather that she lives at Sihayipur.'

She gives vent to a sigh, as though of great relief.

'Then you do not know the name?' she says. 'Who could it be? What a very strange piece of news! The idea of Mr. Grafton being secretly engaged! I hardly can believe it!'

'But remember, Diana,' he interposes, quickly, 'that this is in the strictest confidence. He would never forgive me if it got abroad.'

'Of course, Frank,' she answers, proudly. 'You may place implicit trust in me—I will be as silent as the grave.'

'I know you will,' he says, confidently. 'And you can give me no clue as to the young lady's personality?'

'None,' she says, meaningly, with a faint flicker of a smile playing upon her lips. 'I really cannot imagine, unless it be Miss Henderson—but that is hardly possible, for she must be at least ten years his senior. Now I remember that he did certainly pay her some attention, but I never for a moment imagined that there was anything serious between them.'

'Ten years! Oh! that cannot be possible,' he exclaims, quickly. 'Can you think of no one else?'

'It may be Miss Rigby,' she says, with a sense of sudden enlightenment. 'Yes—of course—it must be Miss Rigby. How very stupid of me not to remember her. Why, he was always with her! Just fancy, their being engaged! Well—I *am* surprised!'

'Is she nice?' he asks, in a hesitating tone.

'Oh, yes—she is a pretty little thing. Hardly the wife for a poor man, though,' she adds, with a little laugh. 'She is just a trifle too fond of her personal adornment.'

'I am sorry for that,' he says in a voice of genuine distress. 'George is not well enough off to support a wife of extravagant tastes.'

'Isn't he?' she asks, in a tone of interest. 'How much should you say he had?'

'He has nothing of his own, poor chap, I know. His pay in the Military Works Department is five hundred a year—but that will not give play for much extravagance.'

'No, you are right,' she says, in a musing tone. 'Five hundred a year, entirely dependent on his life and health, is not a princely prospect for his *fiancée*. But why should this announcement make you anxious?' she asks, suddenly.

'Well, you see, I am so very fond of George that I dread to think what may be the consequences of this step to our friendship. I could not bear to lose him.'

'But why *should* you lose him?' she asks, in innocent wonder.

'Don't you see that this important step on his part must of necessity change the whole tenor of his life. New ties will arise around him, and possibly old friendships will be forgotten.'

He speaks in a sad tone, thoroughly distressed in mind. She answers him with a laugh.

'What nonsense, Frank!' she cries. 'If Mr. Grafton's affection for you can be so easily stifled, it is not really worth the trouble of retaining. From what I understand from you, his regard for you is quite exceptional—and believe me,' she continues, impressively, 'such regards are not easily forgotten. You take such a gloomy view of all things. Instead of lamenting, you should be delighted at his prospect of future happiness.'

'I know that,' he exclaims. 'I fully comprehend the selfishness of my conduct. But, if you only knew how I loved him, you would find some excuse for me. As you say, George's affection for me is far too strong to be swept away in a moment. But there is another question to be con-

sidered. How do I know that *she* will take a liking to me? She may resent my affection for her husband, and show me that my presence is undesired.'

Again she gives vent to the same low laugh of amusement.

'My dear Frank,' she says, 'you are much too humble-minded. Why should you under-value your attractions? Believe me, when I tell you, that you have no cause whatever for alarm. Women are not such inhuman creatures as you make out. She will welcome you as a brother.'

'Ah! if I could only think so,' he says, with a sigh.

'There is no thinking about it,' she says, smiling, 'for I *know* it; I am as certain of it as I am sitting here. And now, Frank, we ought really to be saying good-night. We have been so engrossed in our conversation that we have never noticed the twilight creeping on. And, Frank—when you write to Mr. Grafton I don't think—that—that you had better mention our intimacy. It might by some chance get to my father's ears, and then I should never know a moment's peace afterwards.'

'Of course I won't, Diana,' he answers,

hastily, 'trust me never by word or deed to betray to any living soul our secret. When George arrives, of course——'

Her fingers close suddenly on his hand.

'He is not coming yet, is he?' she says, in a hurried voice.

'No, not at present—he cannot get leave—but when he *does* come, I meant, I suppose I may tell him of our secret friendship?'

'Of course you may, Frank,' she says, looking up into his face with a confiding glance, for they have risen from the ground. 'And now you must go! You go first—it is your turn—and I will follow afterwards in a few minutes.'

He stands lingering by her side, looking down hungrily on to her up-turned face.

'I suppose,' he says, with a certain hesitation, 'that—that I should not be allowed to say good-night in a warmer way?'

'Of course you may,' she says, smiling. 'Give me a brother's kiss, and say good-night.'

She raises her face to his, and their lips meet in a warm kiss, and then, with a hurried glance, he turns away and leaves her.

She remains standing under the old oak long after his footsteps have died away, wrestling with her inmost thoughts.

'What am I doing?' she murmurs, in a hoarse whisper. 'Am I mad that I act like this? Why did I not tell him the truth to-night? What reason had I to mystify him in the way I did? I feel myself drifting slowly, slowly into ruin—and, when there is yet time, I do not make an effort to save myself. Ah! my God, I cannot tell him—I cannot give him up—for he is already more to me than I could bear to lose!'

CHAPTER III.

GRANDBY SEEKS FOR INFORMATION.

GRANDBY, as usual, is again late for dinner. Mrs. Lamb casts a reproachful glance towards him as he enters and takes his seat beside her. He apologises with a smile, promising to be more punctual for the future.

'Ah,' she says, coquettishly, 'I am beginning to understand what your promises are worth. What a long walk you must have taken! Where have you been?'

Grandby answers vaguely; his limited knowledge of Doonga does not allow him to venture on details regarding this fictitious walk.

'You appear to have been very absent-minded,' she remarks, with a little laugh, 'from what I can gather from your incoherent description, you seem to have been under the impression that you were in

several distinct places at the same time. Garam Point must be at least three miles from Honeybank.'

He laughs in reply.

'I trust you will forgive me for my lamentable ignorance of the environments of Doonga,' he says, lightly. 'I have no doubt that my statement is bristling with inaccuracies.'

Mrs. Stockton is not present, and her husband's chair is also vacant. Grandby looks up and down the table, and nods to one or two slight acquaintances which he has made during his sojourn at the hotel.

At this moment Major Lamb enters, looking very hot and hurried. He seats himself on the other side of Grandby, and, having said 'Good-evening,' he bends towards his wife and whispers,

'He is gone! There is no chance now of his being caught.'

'How far is he off?' she says, excitedly. 'Where did you leave him?'

'Some miles the other side of Honeybank. He is riding as fast as he can go, and his servant is taking his kit on mules. By to-night he will be three marches off, and out of reach of her clutches.'

'Oh, I am so glad,' she cries, her eyes sparkling with excitement. 'Do you know, Mr. Grandby, what we have done?' she adds, turning towards him, and sinking her voice to a whisper, 'we have carried off Colonel Stockton.'

'Done what?' he exclaims, in a puzzled tone.

'Hush, don't speak so loud,' she says, glancing furtively around her. 'Colonel Stockton has gone—has fled from that horrible woman upstairs into Kashmir. You know, he has long wished to go there, but she utterly forbade him to do so, threatening to accompany him if he did. You may imagine the poor man's consternation at such an unpleasing prospect.'

'And he has managed to go without her, after all?'

'Yes, thanks to my good husband there,' she says, with a glance of pride in his direction, 'he has gone—he went this afternoon, and he is now three marches out, my husband says. Ever since he first proposed to go, Mrs. Stockton has never allowed him out of her sight, fearing, I suppose, that he might bolt. But I am quite sure that the poor old creature hadn't

the pluck to ever think of such a thing.'

'Then what finally induced him to go?'

'My husband,' she answers, proudly. 'He took the old man aside, and said, "Now is your chance! The old party is down on her back with a broken wind! I will arrange the travelling-kit—meet me at the post-office at three o'clock, and we will start." Wasn't it a splendid undertaking? Oh! Charles,' she says, turning to her husband, 'I cannot tell you how proud I am of you—it was a magnificent conception.'

Major Lamb accepts his wife's laudation with a modest and becoming demeanour.

'Look out for squalls, old woman!' he says, laughing. 'Won't there be a shindy just, when she finds it out! I hope to goodness she rids us of her presence by starting off in hot pursuit—she will never catch him now.'

After dinner, at Mrs. Lamb's earnest solicitation, Grandby accompanies them to her private room, where she graciously allows him to smoke a cigarette, which favour the gallant major accepts as applying equally to himself, so he opens his pipe-case, and, in spite of much expostulation, puffs away furiously at a coloured

meerschaum. The night is warm, and Grandby and Mrs. Lamb stroll out on to the balcony and gaze on the moon-lit scene. He is in a silent mood, giving abstracted answers to her flow of conversation, and she imagines that he must be tired. In reality, his thoughts are occupied with Diana Forsdyke, and he finds the greatest difficulty in keeping his attention fixed within the bounds of politeness on Mrs. Lamb's inanities of speech. A subtle perfume of flowers rises from below, and he leans forward to ascertain the cause.

'What a lovely smell those roses have, he remarks, for want of something better to say.

'Yes,' she answers, 'is it not exquisite? They are *Gloires-de-Dijon* and greatly prized by the proprietor of the hotel.'

'Are they *Gloires-de-Dijon?*' he exclaims, with sudden interest, his thoughts reverting to those mysterious wreaths lying in the cemetery.

'Of course they are!' she says, with an affected little laugh. 'The Banbury roses are famed throughout Doonga, for these are the only plants of this species in the whole station. You can always tell a Ban-

bury lady at a dance because no others are able to obtain the lovely flower.'

He makes some inane reply, and shortly afterwards says good-night. If these flowers be, in reality, peculiar to the hotel, it becomes evident that, in all probability, it is some one actually living in the hotel at the present moment who has placed the wreaths upon his sister's grave in the last two days. But who this some one can be he has not the least conception. As far as he knows, there is no one in the hotel who could possibly have borne his sister such a lasting affection as to continue now, four years after her death, to honour her grave with floral offerings. Being unable to arrive at any satisfactory solution of the mystery, he dismisses the subject, and turns his attention to the concoction of a letter in reply to the one received from George Grafton.

Under the influence of Miss Forsdyke's soothing words, he now views the notion of his friend's engagement in a calmer frame of mind. He understands that, in the first excitement consequent on the news, his thoughts had worked a trifle incoherently. Regarding the matter now, he comprehends

that there is no earthly reason why his friendship with Grafton should not continue on a warm and fraternal footing—if not on the same affectionate basis as hitherto. There must, of course, be some difference in their future relationship to one another—the step which his friend proposes to take is of such an important character that it would be impossible for it to be otherwise; he can no longer expect to stand first in his friend's thoughts; he must necessarily sink to a subordinate position. But, then, this is only as it ought to be—it was only right and natural that the wife should stand before the friend, and to resent it was as ridiculous as it was unjust.

So, arguing in this way, his better self predominates, and he sits down and writes his friend a letter of heart-felt congratulation. He states with what astonishment he has received the news, mentioning also his own deep anxiety on the subject, and confiding fully all the selfish ideas which struggled in his brain.

'I am calmer now,' he writes; 'I see now that I was hasty in my conclusions. I feel quite certain, come what may, that I shall never lose your friendship. It is built on

such a strong foundation that it would require more than human agency to effect its fall. But still you must admit that I have cause for some anxiety. *You* regard me with the distorted eye of a strong affection and exaggerate the good in my character, refusing to perceive the bad. But *she*—your wife—will see me *as I am;* making no allowance for my failings. She will regard me with the dispassionate eye of a stranger, and her verdict will be formed, unbiassed by affection. And should her verdict be unsatisfactory—should she conceive for me an involuntary antipathy—it is impossible for me to conceal the fact that our fond intimacy must of necessity come to an end.'

And so on in this strain he hurriedly pours out the inmost feelings of his heart, writing rapidly without pausing to weigh his words, conscious of that uncomfortable sensation of awkwardness and shame which all men feel when they raise for a moment their natural reserve of manner and demonstratively make confession of their affection.

In finishing his letter he somewhat throws off the heavy weight oppressing his mind,

and attempts to be jocose, though he is far from feeling what he writes.

'I hope that you have well-considered the question of ways and means,' he writes. 'As a young lady remarked to me to-day, five hundred a year entirely dependent on your health and life does not offer a princely prospect to your *fiancée*. Are you quite certain that Miss Rigby's tastes are in accordance with this sum. You must have observed yourself how very extravagant she is in the matter of dress. Now, George, do be careful!'

This occurs in the postscript, and he half-smiles to himself as he pictures George's astonishment at finding his little mystery exposed. His friend will never guess how he has obtained the information, and he determines not to enlighten him until he sees him face to face.

There is one point in the matter which puzzles him considerably. George Grafton speaks in the most eager terms of his intention of going to seek his lady-love directly the period of enforced silence has elapsed; he also states most positively that immediately on his obtaining leave he will

proceed straightway to Doonga, and, as the two dates will probably coincide, it is a mystery to Grandby what he means.

The only possible solution is that his intended is actually now, or will be at that date, in Doonga, and Grandby resolves, before getting into bed, to make strict inquiries on the morrow as to the existence or non-existence in the station of Miss Rigby.

'The sooner I make her acquaintance the better,' he thinks, ruefully. 'If she be living here, I will call on her to-morrow.'

Accordingly at breakfast the next morning, he seeks information on the matter from Mrs. Lamb, but he arrives at no satisfactory result.

Mrs. Lamb confesses to being unacquainted personally with Miss Rigby; she cannot say for certain whether such a person does exist in Doonga; she has a feeling that the name is in some way familiar to her, but where she could have heard it mentioned before she cannot remember in the least; it may have been last year, or it may have been the year before, or the year before that—she really cannot say. Her memory is so bad that she never can remember *any-*

thing. But now that she considers the subject she has an idea that two years before in Dalhousie, she had met a young lady of that name, though really she cannot say for certain whether it was not Digby instead of Rigby—in fact, on thinking over the matter, she feels certain that it *was* Digby—or at any rate some name beginning with a D. But it was not Rigby she is fully convinced, so probably it was not the same young lady, as he is referring to.

'No, probably not,' says Grandby, drily, rising from his seat. 'Thank you so much—I am so very sorry to have put you to so much trouble.'

Mrs. Lamb begs that he will not mention it; she is only too happy to be able to oblige such a very charming young man as Mr. Grandby; she only trusts that he will make a point of coming to her on every occasion when he may be in doubt; she will always be delighted to assist him to the best of her very poor abilities; and now she remembers that the young lady at Dalhousie was named Dighton, and not Digby; the close similarity of the names had for the moment confused her; it was an extremly stupid mistake for her to make; but she is glad

that she has been able to correct herself, for now she has proved beyond doubt that the two young ladies cannot be the same.

'No, I have no doubt about the matter *now*,' he says, with good-humoured emphasis.

'But if your Miss Digby—Dighton—Rigby, I mean, be young and pretty,' she continues, 'you will have no trouble in ascertaining where she lives, if she really be in Doonga.'

'How? In what way?'

'By seeking information from one who is on terms of the warmest intimacy with every pretty girl within a hundred miles—from that most charming of men, Vernon Loftus. If she be pretty, and if she be in Doonga, it stands to reason that he knows her—and knows her well.'

He thanks her for the suggestion with a smile, and he leaves the room, and strolls slowly down in the direction of the club.

It is a delicious morning, the atmosphere clear and cool, and the native village is looking very picturesque, rising tier above tier up the mountain side, all shining brightly in the warm sunlight. Garam Point has emerged from the sea of cloud in which for the last two days it has been

enveloped, and the old watch-tower, standing on its summit, can now plainly be discerned, lifting up its bare grey walls from amidst the mass of luxuriant foliage surrounding it.

Arriving at the club, Grandby turns down the little pathway, and proceeds straightway to Loftus' room, which he finds untenanted. Glancing at the clock to see the time, he finds the hands still pointing to two o'clock, at which proof of the eccentricity of his friend he laughs softly to himself. To while away the time, he proceeds to inspect the treasures scattered about the room.

Along the mantelpiece is placed a line of unframed photographs, mostly of young and pretty girls,—actresses and social acquaintances in various stages of nudity, indiscriminately mixed—and, having examined them, he comes to the conclusion that Mrs. Lamb was not far wrong in her estimate of the fascinating power wielded by Loftus over the fair sex. Above, upon the wall, lying in the rack, are four or five hunting-crops and whips, and he takes them down one by one and gravely criticises their respective merits, for to Grandby

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everything connected with horsemanship and racing is a matter of the most serious interest. Having chosen in favour of number three, he replaces them on the rack, and turns his attention to another quarter of the room.

There is a small table standing by the bed, and on it are placed a decanter, containing whisky, a glass, the remains of a cigar, and a yellow novel. He takes up the book and opens it, and finds that it is written in French. Wondering at such erudition on the part of his friend, he looks at the title-page, and discovers it to be Zola's 'Nana,' and immediately ceases to wonder. Loftus, he knows, would tackle Arabic, in order to obtain undiluted realism.

Turning to the larger table, he becomes conscious of a perfect chaos. Books, papers, pipes, gloves, tobacco, matches, glasses, cigarette-cases, a pair of slippers, and a clothes-brush—all seem to be struggling for supremacy. But, from out of this mass of heterogeneous articles, one object attracts his fixed attention; it is the photograph of a man, framed in sage-green plush.

He lifts it up with almost reverential

care, and carries it to the light, and gazes long and earnestly upon it. It is a very handsome face, which meets his view—the face of a man of apparently four or five and twenty, with a small black moustache and dare-devil laughing eyes, with a well-shaped, pointed chin, and lips half-unclosed in a pleasant smile—a face of irresistible attractive power, disclosing plainly in its every contour a weakness of mind and readiness to sin. It is a picture of Charlie Talbot, who had been brother-officer to Loftus, and Grandby experiences a very painful sensation as he regards that laughing face, now dead.

It is very like him! The image of his sister's husband rises before him, and he sighs, as he contrasts the picture of the dashing young officer, who used to ride over daily to their house near Canterbury, with the cold silent gravestone in the cemetery. What a sad fate was his! Born into the world, gifted with more than average personal advantages and possessing more wealth than he required, to be cut off in the very prime of life, away from home and friends—to die a fearful death in the solitudes of Kashmir! Who

could have foreseen such a tragic ending to that gay and careless life?

'Sorry I am late, old chap,' says a voice behind him; 'saw you pass from breakfast-room, and straightway bolted a cup of coffee and a devilled kidney, which almost took the roof off of my mouth. Ah! poor Charlie! Is it not a perfect likeness?'

His voice suddenly changes to one of tenderness. Grandby replaces the photograph on the table, and turns round and shakes him by the hand.

'Strangely enough,' he says, 'it was on this very subject that I wanted to talk to you about. I wished to ask you some questions relating to poor Charlie's death.'

Loftus motions him to take a seat.

CHAPTER IV.

THE STORY OF TALBOT'S DEATH.

'WELL, old chap,' said Loftus, sitting himself down and taking a cheroot from the box by his side, 'what is it you want? I shall be very glad to tell you what I know.'

'It was about this day three years ago that we heard of poor Talbot's death,' says Grandby, slowly, beginning at once *in medias res*. 'We were led to understand that he died from a fall from a precipice in the northern wilds of Kashmir. Yesterday I happened to visit the cemetery, and to my surprise I discovered that he was lying there beside his wife. I thought that you, being his special friend, might be able to explain this fact to me.'

'Certainly I can,' Loftus answers, with a forced briskness. 'There is no mystery about the affair. He was killed, as you

say, by a fall from a precipice in Kashmir. An Englishman happened to have been passing through those parts at that time, and he attended to the body, brought it home here, and laid it beside his wife.'

'That was a truly noble act on his part. Do you know his name? I would give anything to be able to clasp him by the hand, and thank him.'

'Yes, I know his name,' answers Loftus, promptly. 'But I am quite certain that he would be very averse to being thanked.'

'But, anyhow, tell me his name,' says Grandby, eagerly.

'Certainly I will, since you wish it,' says Loftus. 'It was I, myself.'

'*You*, Loftus!' cries Grandby, in astonishment, 'why have you never told me so before? How can I thank you sufficiently for your truly noble action?'

'I do not want your thanks, old boy,' says Loftus, with a smile, 'nor do I in any way deserve them. You seem to forget that Charlie was my greatest friend in life, and that it was only natural for me to obey his dying wish.'

'What! Did he speak before he died?'

'Yes,' answers Loftus, gravely, 'he spoke

a few words expressing a wish to be buried beside his wife. It was a very sad occurrence, especially considering the circumstances under which he died. Poor old Charlie! I have always felt glad that at the last he remembered his little wife. Your sister, Grandby, was a woman in a a thousand.'

'I know it—I know it,' says Grandby, faintly. 'Tell me all about it, Loftus.'

'You cannot imagine the change which she wrought in Talbot,' says Loftus, continuing his own line of thought. 'From the day he married her, he became a different man. Her influence over him was simply wonderful, but so it was over everyone she met. He became the steadiest chap in the whole regiment. Ah! often did we quiz and chaff him on his benedict proclivities, and often have we—more shame to us—tried to tempt him in the mess with a bottle of good Heidseick! But he never yielded—he loved his wife so well that he gave up all his former pleasures for her sake, and he became as good as gold.'

'Yes,' says Grandby, in a hushed voice, 'so she wrote and told me.'

'I never shall forget that awful time she died,' continues Loftus. 'It was a dreadful shock to all of us, for she had endeared herself to the whole regiment with her gentle loving ways. But to Talbot it was almost death. It struck him down with such violence that at one time fears were entertained for his reason. He acted like a madman, and, worse luck, he never in reality recovered.'

Loftus' voice falters, and, as though ashamed of his weakness, he rises and pours himself out a stiff glass of whisky, which he swallows at a gulp.

'You see, it happened like this,' he says, resuming his seat. 'In the spring of that year—it was '79, I think—she became far from well. The climate of India did not suit her. And as the hot weather began to come on, and she showed signs of getting worse, Talbot was compelled to decide to separate from her for a time by sending her to the hills. I happened to be first for leave that year, so it was settled that I should bring her up to Doonga—which I did. We became very fast friends up here, and I was glad to see that the mountain air was gradually restoring her

to health. I used to write very often to Charlie, reporting progress, and I know for a fact that he used to write to her every other day. And so the month of April came to a close and May commenced.

'It was about the 10th of May that she first complained to me of feeling ill. She felt feverish, she said, and she suffered from a pain in her right below the waist. In the next few days she became much worse, and on the 17th the doctor announced that she was down with typhoid fever. I telegraphed at once for Talbot and the next day he arrived. I cannot attempt to describe to you how he suffered. All through those dreary three weeks which followed it was pitiable to see him. And when she died—it was at three o'clock on the morning of the 3rd of June, and I was present at her side—he fell down like one suddenly struck dead. I have often thought since that it would have been better for him had he actually died then.'

'Why?' says Grandby, very faintly. 'I say, old chap, may I have a little spirits. I—I feel rather—thirsty this morning.'

'Yes, certainly, old boy,' cries Loftus, jumping up with alacrity, and bustling to

the table glad of any excuse to conceal his own feelings. 'Here, drink this—it is, as you say, very warm to-day—quite like the middle of summer. Well, you see,' he continues, resuming his seat and relighting his cheroot. 'After poor Charlie recovered from that awful shock, he was never quite himself again. He could not stand the weight upon his mind, and he was always trying to drown his care. He became feverishly excitable—neglectful of his duties—and often have I seen him—poor chap—the worse for drink. We all saw that he was going rapidly to the dogs, and we all tried to do our best to save him, but it was all in vain. The poor old chap, as you know, was naturally weak-minded, and nothing could persuade him to desist, and, after his dear little wife died, he became twenty times worse than he ever was before. I often used to think that he was doing it on purpose with the deliberate intention of killing himself. But it was not only the drink. He plunged fiercely into all amusements, used to dine out three times a week, and attend all parties, flirting desperately with every woman he met. The result of course was inevitable—he became entangled

more than once in very shady affairs.'

'Yes—so I heard,' says Grandby. 'We even heard that there was a woman in some way connected with his death.'

'Yes—there is no doubt that he went terribly to ruin; but we none of us thought, when he used to be planning his Kashmir trip, that he would so soon be taken away from us. You see it happened like this. He and I had planned to spend our summer leave of the year 1880 in the wilds of Kashmir. We had determined to leave the usual districts round Sarinagar, frequented by the British, and to penetrate northward, thinking by so doing that we might get better sport. So we came up together and stopped a few days here in Doonga. And here, worse luck, he met a girl with whom in a few days he fell hopelessly in love, or what stood him in the place of love. She was living here with her father, and the old man, knowing Talbot's reputation by hearsay, would have nothing to do with him, and gave him the cold shoulder. However, Talbot was not to be daunted, and the young lady, falling willingly into his plans, consented to meet him secretly. You remember where I met you yesterday?'

'Yes.'

'Well, it was in a secluded wood near there that they used to meet every day. A week passed like this, and, as our leave was limited, I was beginning to feel impatient. So I spoke to him on the subject, but he refused to listen to me. Entreaties, expostulations were useless; I verily believe that for the time he was literally bewitched. I felt a compunction at leaving him behind, for I well knew his fatal weakness of mind, and I could not foresee what might be the end of this unfortunate affair. But when I spoke to him again he only laughed, and told me not to fear for him, that he thoroughly understood his own business, and was determined to remain some time longer. So after some delay we decided that I should go on ahead to the spot which we had fixed upon, and that he would follow in a week or so, letting me know by messenger when he was likely to arrive. Finding it impossible to turn him from his resolve, I at last agreed to this unsatisfactory arrangement, and I started off alone. He rode down with me as far as Honeybank, and well do I remember his graceful figure turning round

and waving me good-bye. My God, when next I saw him—he was greatly changed.'

A sudden gulp rises in his throat, and he hastily jumps up, and pours out another glass of whisky, which he raises to his lips with trembling hands. Grandby says nothing; he dare not trust himself to speak, so he waits patiently for his friend to continue his narration.

In a moment Loftus has recovered from his weakness, and he reseats himself and begins to speak in a somewhat steadier voice.

'Well,' he says, 'I started, and in course of time I reached the appointed place, and I found good sport, though perhaps it did not come up to our expectations. To tell the truth, I was feeling terribly lonely. I am not a keen enough sportsman to be able to enjoy a life of perfect solitude for long, and it had never been my intention to go alone; so I began to look forward eagerly to the expected messenger. He came at last, after I had been about a fortnight alone, and brought a letter from Talbot, in which he stated that he had started, and would probably arrive about five or six days after the bearer of the note. The

track was a straight one, and impossible to miss, so I immediately packed up my tent, and determined to start south to meet him. In three days I came across him, and never shall I forget the moment when I first set eyes on all that remained of Charlie Talbot.'

'What! was he dead, then?' says Grandby, with painful interest.

'No, but dying—dying fast,' answers Loftus, in a low voice. 'His tent was pitched by the roadside, and before I entered it something told me that it was not all right. Standing outside the doorway, I distinctly heard the sound of a woman's sobs.'

'A woman!' cries Grandby, in amazement. 'You cannot mean to tell me, Loftus, that the girl came with him?'

'It was a woman sobbing. I hastily raised the fly of the tent and entered. He was lying on a camp bedstead covered with blood, his face deadly pale, uttering groan after groan. It was a terrible sight, and I hastened towards him, and bent over him, my heart too sick to speak.'

'And the woman—the woman—what did she do?'

'She threw herself on the ground beside his bed, and with a face distorted with grief implored me to save him. But, as to saving him, it was an utter impossibility. He was fearfully mutilated; both his legs and one of his arms were broken, the ribs on his right side were smashed in, and from his terrible groans I could tell that he had experienced some fatal internal injury. His face was not marred in any way, but it was so deadly pale that it seemed as though I were looking on his ghost. He was not conscious of my presence; his eyes were fixed glassily on the canvas of the tent, and he was wandering in his speech, and all his bed was covered with blood from the compound fractures of his arms and legs. Oh! Grandby, my dear boy, it was an awful, terrible, sickening sight!'

He covers his eyes with his hands, as though to shut out the painful vision which his words have conjured up, and for several moments there is silence in the room. Grandby is by far too agitated to speak, and he sits there picturing in his mind that death-bed scene, with all its gloomy accessories, and a feeling of insen-

sate hatred against the unknown woman arises in his breast.

'And how did it all happen?' he asks, after a long pause.

'The woman—or rather girl, for she was nothing more—was beside herself with fear and grief,' says Loftus, 'and from her frenzied self-reproaches I gathered how the terrible accident took place. They had been walking beside a precipice of jagged rock, and in a spirit of devilry—curse her fair face and beauty!—she had *dared* poor Charlie to get her a flower which she saw growing several yards below them. You may remember Talbot's fierce impetuosity—he had only to be told that he could *not* do a thing to make him resolved at any risk to prove the contrary. And so it was in this case. To prove his love, he accepted the challenge, and how it actually happened I cannot say, but his foot slipped, and he was hurled down on to the cruel rocks, a hundred feet below him. I afterwards inspected the spot personally; the rocks were smeared with clotted blood, and how it was that he was not killed at once I cannot imagine. These details I learned partly from the girl's ravings, and

partly from inquiry of the native servant who was with them at the time. It was an inhuman thing to make him do, and though she probably spoke in utter thoughtlessness, yet there is no doubt that it was through her instrumentality that he came by his awful death.'

'Ah! I was certain of it!' cries Grandby, excitedly. 'Something intuitively told me that it was that vile wretch who caused his death.'

'Hush! you should not judge her harshly. Had you seen her, as I did, grovelling at my feet, stricken with remorse, you would have felt some pity for the girl. Had she for one moment considered the risk which she was making him run, I feel convinced that she would never have asked him to do it. It was all done in a moment of thoughtlessness; it was merely the act of a capricious girl, anxious to prove her power over the man she loved. But she suffered for the act. Ah, Grandby, words will not tell you how she suffered. I can never recall this sad scene without a sense of pity arising within me for that poor girl, for she loved him passionately in her fierce, lustful manner, and she had given

up everything in life for his sake. For days afterwards she was in a delirium, tortured by the thought that she had killed a fellow-creature, and it required all my powers of persuasion to convince her to the contrary.'

'What did you do with her?' he asks, curiously, after a slight pause.

'Well, about five o'clock that evening poor Charlie died. But before he died a glimmer of consciousness came over him, and I fancied that he recognised me, for he murmured something about being buried beside his wife. The girl, as I have said, completely lost her senses, and I, with the help of the servant, nursed her for five long days. In that interim some of the natives of the place built me up a rude coffin, and they placed poor Charlie in it, having first subjected the body to some process of embalming with which they were acquainted. And then we began our sad journey homeward, for I was determined to carry out the poor boy's dying wish.'

'And the girl?'

'She came with us, and, when we arrived near civilized parts, I left her with the

servant, giving him strict injunctions to take her round by a circuitous route, and to wait for me at a certain place. I, with the necessary witnesses, took the body to Sarinagar, and there testified to the proper authorities the circumstances of his death, leaving out all mention of the girl. After a short delay there we started again, and in course of time we met the girl at the appointed place. It was now my first endeavour to screen *her*—so we only travelled by night, resting by day, she keeping within her tent. In a few days we arrived near Doonga, and then it was that I first appreciated the difficulties of my position. The question which puzzled me was, what was I to do with her, and it was then she told me her whole story, informing me of a fact which hitherto I had not known, which was, that Charlie had torn himself away from Doonga, and that she had followed him of her own accord, leaving her home and voluntarily choosing a life of sin. She explained to me that if her father refused to take her back she was literally homeless and destitute—so I determined to risk his anger, and to go and plead for her.'

'Ah! Loftus, that was noble of you,' says Grandby, viewing him in admiration.

'I left her in a secluded place outside Doonga, with the servant, and I hastened on with poor Charlie's body, which I buried the next day beside his wife's. And then I went to see her father. How I ever induced him to take her back I cannot imagine, but such in fact was the result of my mission. He was terribly broken down at the thought of his daughter's disgrace, and I found out that on her disappearance in desperation he had given out to the world that she had gone into Kashmir to stay with a friend—so no one was aware of the true facts of the case except myself, for I can swear that no one saw her when she was under my charge. How the rumour ever arose that there was a woman connected with the death I cannot say; probably it was owing to the servants chattering on the subject, though I bribed them heavily to silence. And now, old boy, that is the whole story; and I trust that you will keep it secret, for I have never disclosed it before to a living soul.'

'You may trust me, Loftus,' replies Grandby, gravely, 'I am filled with amaze-

ment at your strange story. Have you seen the woman since?'

'Yes,' says Loftus, after a pause, 'I have met her since.'

'And has she quite recovered?'

'Yes—quite recovered. She is now moving in society, as though nothing had happened, although, it is true, there is some vague cloud overhanging her. There is an idea prevalent that there has been a scandal about her at some time or other of her life, and she is given rather the cold shoulder by certain people, but no one can say exactly what it is—so the matter is generally ignored, and she is accepted as an equal.'

'It is extraordinary!' says Grandby, musingly. 'You *have* surprised me, Loftus. Considering all this, I suppose there is no need for me to ask you whether it was you who placed those wreaths upon their graves.'

'Wreaths,' repeats Loftus, with an expression of the blankest astonishment. 'What wreaths? No, Grandby, it was not I.'

'Not you! Then who could it possibly have been? Yesterday I went to the

cemetery, and on both poor Adelaide's and Charlie's graves there was laid a wreath of fresh roses—*Gloires-de-Dijon.* If it were not you, I cannot imagine who it could have been.'

'No, it was not I, Grandby,' answers Loftus, in a strangely reflective tone. '*Gloires-de-Dijon* only spring from Banbury's! Who could it have been? I confess that I am completely mystified. But now, Grandby,' he cries, suddenly relapsing into his usual tone of voice, 'let us be more cheerful! This sort of conversation is neither good for man nor beast. Put on your hat and come round to the breakfast-room, and by Jove, sir, if we don't polish off a magnum of dry Monopole between us, I will turn good-templar for the rest of my blooming days.'

CHAPTER V.

'FOR HER SAKE.'

At the earnest solicitation of Grandby, a quart bottle of dry Monopole is substituted for the suggested magnum, and they are soon both engaged in discussing its merits. To Grandby, it appears to be an excellent specimen of dry champagne, but Loftus, with a keenly critical look upon his face, refuses to give an unqualified opinion, at the same time hinting darkly that the club is rapidly going to the dogs.

'No,' he says, wisely shaking his head, as he drains off the last glass in the bottle of which he has drunk at least two-thirds. 'No, it is certainly not up to the mark. It is a beastly shame to attempt to palm off cheap wines on the members of the club. Six rupees a quart! How can one expect to get the genuine article for a paltry six rupees?'

'It seemed to me to be really excellent,' remarks Grandby, with a smile. 'And as to being cheap—there, I beg to differ with you. In our mess, Christy's best is only five rupees the quart.'

'Ah! yes, in a mess—that's quite different!' says Loftus, with a smile of superior wisdom. 'Our one thought in a mess is to obtain everything as cheap as possible—one is on duty there, and consequently careful. But in a club in the Himalayas, where one may be supposed to be enjoying a little holiday, it is only natural that one should wish to relax a little from one's usual habits.'

'You mean that you would like to pay higher prices for everything you get?'

'Well—not exactly that. But I should like to feel that I was spending money,'—with a vague sweep of the hand in the air—'more than I could afford, in fact. Sitting here with a balance credit at my banker's how can I possibly imagine that I am on a holiday. It is not a holiday—it is merely duty.'

'You seem to think that a holiday necessarily implies a long list of debts.'

'Of course I do,' he says, decidedly. 'And

who doesn't? In my present prosperous condition, how can I enjoy myself? What excitement is there in life for me, when I know that I can pay my way? How is it possible to enter into the fun of all these chaps here, with my pockets full of gold? No, Grandby, old boy, I can tell you that the sense of being flush depresses me—literally depresses me. My life is one listless routine of insipidity; and when I see that fellow Bramley in the card-room, staking far more than he possesses, and watch his eager face as the cards turn up, why—I envy him! He knows that everything—name, honour, fortune—depends upon the colour of the card, and he experiences in consequence a beatific thrill of excitement which I can never hope to feel. Ah!' he says, shaking his head sorrowfully, 'my lot is very hard.'

'Ah—very!' answers Grandby, with good-humoured irony. 'I really pity you from the bottom of my heart. But can nothing be done to alleviate your misfortune, or is your purse impossible to empty?'

'Impossible—in Doonga,' he answers, dismally. 'My dear boy, I have tried it

over and over again, but it is no go. Day after day have I been to Shortt's until I am literally sick of the sight of his shop. Every single day for a month, I went and bought a cigarette-case, a bottle of scent, and a piece of soap. But such monotony palls upon one at last. There is no variety in Doonga. If you *don't* go to Shortt's, there is nowhere else to go, and, if you *do* go to Shortt's, you are compelled to buy soap or scent or cigarette-cases. True, you can get a pink drink there—but it is wishy-washy stuff at the best, and weak at the strongest. What was I to do? At the end of a month I had thirty pieces of soap, thirty bottles of scent, and thirty cigarette-cases. Not smoking cigarettes, the last were useless to me, so I distributed them amongst my friends—and, 'pon my sacred word of honour, they actually seemed pleased to accept them: and one of them—a young chap in the 9th—said he really didn't like taking such a handsome present—when all the time I was praying for the future of his soul, I was so grateful to him for relieving me of the incubus. The thirty bottles of scent, I packed up and sent anonymously to Mrs. Lamb. It was beastly smelling stuff, I

believe, though I never opened them to see, so I hope for your sake, Grandby, that she does not make use of it at dinner-time. As for the soap the sight of them drove me mad. I could not well offer them to any friend male or female—as such a present would have seemed so damnably suggestive of a hint to them to wash a little oftener —so I placed them upon the table in my room, and anathematized them daily—and I have never entered Shortt's since. The worm will turn at last, you know,' he adds, with a feeble smile.

'And what did you do with them, finally?' asks Grandby, gravely.

'Ah! that was very mysterious!' answers Loftus, reflectively. 'As I say, I placed them on the table, and one day, from very weariness of spirit, I began to count them. To my surprise, there were only twenty. The fact of ten being missing gave me a sense of pleasurable excitement, such as I had not felt for weeks. So I began to watch them after that, and one disappeared every day till there was literally not one left. It was most interesting watching them taking their departure, and gave me quite a zest for life. I have often

thought that it was my servant to whom I was indebted for that pleasure, but he denies it. I wish that he would confess the truth, for I should like to thank him.'

'What a pity you can't find out. But surely there is some other way of getting rid of your superfluous cash than by patronising Shortt's. Why not try the card-room?'

'My dear boy, I have tried it; I tell you that I have tried *everything*. I went for a week and played like a madman; staked enormous sums on ridiculous uncertainties —sums which made the fellows' hair stand on end. But it was no good. Do what I could, I always won. At the end of a fortnight I was far better off than when I began, and then I had the mortification of having to take the other chaps' money. Luckily, though, they paid me in paper,' he adds, in parenthesis, 'and paper is not expensive, especially when the club supplies it. So you see I am literally reduced to spending my money in my stables, my clothes, and my club-bill. I have seven animals up here, but then, worse luck, they cost me next to nothing. I have taken them over the most awful ground in the

hopes of laming them, but they are so aggravating that they seem to take a delight in it, and come back sounder than ever. I believe that it is quite a knack to be able to lame horses easily. I certainly don't possess it. But perhaps you do, old chap? I shall be delighted to let you try.'

'As to laming them, I am afraid I should not prove a better hand than you do. But, if you really have no use for them, I should be awfully obliged for the loan of a mount. In the plains I am in the saddle all day long, and there is nothing I miss so much up here as my stables.'

'Would you really?' cries Loftus, leaning forward, with a gleam of brightness on his face. 'Of course you may have them to do what you like with them. I will send the whole seven up to-morrow to the hotel, and you may take your choice. You had better christen them by the days of the week, so as to give them all a fair chance—and, old chap, don't be particular about the ground you travel over. There is a fine jagged piece out beyond Tabernacle Point, and perhaps you may have better luck than I did. To think that such a trifle as the possession of a horse can make you happy!

Twenty squadrons would not rouse me from this listless apathy. How true it is, as the poet said, that "omnia non pariter sunt omnibus apta."'

He introduces this Latin quotation in a voice of such perfect melancholy that Grandby cannot retain his gravity, and he bursts out laughing.

'"All is vanity, saith the preacher!"' murmurs Loftus, in a tone of the utmost misery. 'Waiter! bring me another bottle of dry champagne.'

'Quart, sir?'

'Yes, quart—you are good for another pint, I suppose, Grandby?'

'No—no more for me, thanks,' says Grandby. 'I really could not stand it in the middle of the day.'

'I know your obstinacy of character too well by this time to attempt to dissuade you—so don't think me inhospitable in not pressing the point. Waiter! you may bring me a pint.'

Loftus has apparently forgotten the opinion which he has lately pronounced on the merits of the wine, for he now drinks his pint with the greatest relish, smacking his lips in his enjoyment, and calling for

another bottle; but then it is a noticeable fact that men's opinions do very often change considerably under the influence of a quart of dry champagne. In fact, Loftus, quite forgetting his recent remarks on the subject, observes to Grandby that the quality of the champagne reflects great credit on the establishment, at which sudden change of views the latter laughs most heartily.

'What the deuce are you laughing at?' says Loftus, with a suspicious glance, for, strong as his head undoubtedly is, the amount of wine that he has drunk this morning is beginning to have its effect upon him. 'Is there anything very funny in my remarks, or are you in the habit of jeering at another's misery?'

'I am awfully sorry,' says Grandby, laughing more than ever, for Loftus' face is really beginning to look very red and shiny, presenting a most comical appearance. 'A sudden idea has just recurred to me, and tickled my fancy, that's all. Far from jeering at you, words won't express the depth and reality of my sympathy. You are certainly much to be pitied, although I must admit that you are the first man

who has ever complained to me of being burdened with too much cash.'

'I do not complain of having too much cash,' answers Loftus, in an explanatory, injured tone of voice. 'I merely complain of being so situated that I cannot spend it. If I were at home, in London, I should be happy enough—I should probably be head over ears in debt. But the rural simplicity of the Himalayas gives no opening to a man of my exalted aspirations, as I have explained before. If I were conscious of owing more money to the tradesmen here than I could pay—I might be able to derive some happiness in life. I should take a pleasure in tilting my hat on one side, and parading my person, robed in brand-new, unpaid-for clothes, jauntily before their discomfited faces. But, as the matter stands, such fun is out of the question. I merely sneak about the place like a half-fledged deacon in full canonicals!'

The notion of Loftus fondly imagining to himself that he bears any resemblance whatever to a gentleman of the sacred cloth, is again too much for Grandby's gravity, and he leans back and laughs immoderately, his friend's face expressing

a sense of keen irritation at this unseemly proceeding on his part.

'What you can find to laugh at,' he says, irritably, 'I can't imagine. I suppose,' he adds, sarcastically, 'that *another* sudden idea has just recurred to your mind, and tickled your fancy. I confess, I envy you your fund of humorous recollections.'

This sally does not tend to restore Grandby's gravity, and he continues laughing till the tears roll down his cheeks. Loftus' irritation visibly increases. Since Grandby has been in his presence, he has drunk a tumbler-full of raw whisky, and a certain amount of champagne—enough to give him an undue sense of dignity—and, under its exciting influence, he becomes painfully conscious that his friend is making a butt of him, and nothing that the latter can say can convince him to the contrary. To tell the truth, Grandby's expostulations and apologies are drowned in inextinguishable laughter, and consequently lose all their force. At last Loftus rises supremely indignant, and politely wishes his friend good-morning, insinuating that on their next meeting he hopes to observe a marked improvement in his manners.

'It has never been done to me before,' he exclaims, excitedly. 'Since I left my berceaunette, I never remember to have been so grossly insulted. Good-morning, Grandby, good-morning. You will permit me to wish you a very good-morning;' and with a bow, expressive of the most finished sarcasm, he leaves the room.

Grandby sits for a moment or two, unable to decide whether to be serious or to laugh convulsively. The whole affair has been so absurd that he has the greatest difficulty in preventing himself from giving way to the latter. Before he has had time to rise, however, Loftus reappears, and there is a beam of positive satisfaction on his face, as he advances with outstretched hand.

'Grandby, you are a brick,' he says, forcibly, shaking him by the hand. 'By gad, sir, you are a perfect wonder—you have given me more excitement this morning than I have felt for weeks. I am literally all of a glow. We must certainly split another pint, to celebrate the glad occasion. I really feel another man;' and, in spite of Grandby's protestations, the pint bottle is brought and opened, and Loftus,

having proposed the appropriate toast of 'good-fellowship,' they both drink it in terms of perfect amity.

'How you managed it, I cannot understand,' says Loftus, eagerly. 'It is all a blank to me. But you did it, and that's enough—and by gad, sir, you are a thundering chap—a regular tonic for shattered nerves!'

Grandby listens in amusement, until Loftus has quite exhausted his volumes of gratitude and thanks, and then he deftly turns the conversation.

'Do you know Miss Rigby?' he says, in an indifferent tone of voice.

'What—Emily Rigby? Of course I know her. Who doesn't know the bewitching Emily?'

Grandby inwardly shudders. To hear his friend's *fiancée* termed in a public club 'the bewitching Emily' is anything but agreeable to his sensitive disposition.

'But why do you ask?' says Loftus, curiously.

'I heard yesterday from a great friend of mine at Sihayipur. He tells me that he is engaged to be married, but he does not tell me the lady's name. And, from

what he says, I have a suspicion that it must be Miss Rigby.'

'Miss Rigby!' cries Loftus, incredulously. 'What the deuce put that idea into your head?'

'Is Miss Rigby living in Doonga?'

'Yes, certainly she is. What of it?'

'Ah, I thought so. I am almost certain that his intended is now in Doonga, and I also know that she comes from Sihayipur, so, putting two and two together, I naturally fix upon Miss Rigby.'

'Well, I consider that an exceedingly rash conclusion to arrive at. Miss Rigby is not the only Sihayipur lady now in Doonga.'

'Isn't she? Why—who else is here?'

'Miss Forsdyke, of course.'

'Miss Forsdyke!' cries Grandby, in amusement. 'What an extraordinary idea! I am quite certain that it is not she.'

'Well, I should say that it was just as likely to be Miss Forsdyke as Miss Rigby.'

'But it is not Miss Forsdyke,' says Grandby, confidently. 'I know that for a certainty, for she told me so herself.'

'Oh! she told you so herself, did she?' says Loftus, with sarcastic gravity. 'Then

of course there can be no question on the matter. No one would presume to doubt a lady of such perfectly assured veracity as Miss Forsdyke. And pray, might I be so bold as to ask you when and where she confided to you this interesting piece of information?'

'When or where she told me is nothing to do with the question, Loftus,' says Grandby, flushing hotly. 'It was quite by accident that I mentioned the fact, and I bitterly reproach myself for having been so careless. But, since I have confessed so much, I may admit that I consider myself a personal friend of Miss Forsdyke, and I strongly object to the sneering tone you always adopt in speaking of her.'

'You are labouring under a delusion,' remarks Loftus, suavely.

'I am doing nothing of the sort,' retorts Grandby, quickly. 'You never refer to Miss Forsdyke without indirectly suggesting to her detriment. Every speech you make regarding her leaves an after-taste of nastiness which it is impossible not to notice. Why you dislike the poor girl I do not know, nor do I want to know, but——'

'No, you had better not ask for particulars,' interposes Loftus, coolly.

'No—I am not thinking of doing such a mean action,' cries Grandby, angrily. 'For some reason best known to yourself, you have conceived an aversion for her which you take no pains to conceal. It is so palpable that she herself confessed to being conscious of it.'

'Oh, she told you that too, did she?' says Loftus, calmly. 'Really, this is becoming very interesting. There seems to be no end to her pretty little confidences. May I venture to ask whether she has made any other references to your humble servant?'

'I decline to discuss the lady further,' says Grandby, growing very pale; 'I have told you that Miss Forsdyke is my friend, and in the face of that I consider your sarcastic inuendoes in my presence to be unworthy of a gentleman.'

'Oh! I say, Grandby—steady on!' cries Loftus, starting back. 'Aren't you coming it just a little too strong?'

'Well—why do you goad me on till I lose my temper,' returns Grandby, in a somewhat calmer voice. 'You know that

the lady is my friend, and you seem to take a pleasure in insinuating against her character. What has she done to you that you should seize every opportunity to injure her behind her back? I ask you, is your conduct gentlemanly, or even manly?'

'You certainly state the truth when you say that you have lost your temper,' answers Loftus, steadying his voice with an effort. 'I even think you must have lost your senses, to make use of such grossly exaggerated language as you are doing. When you accuse me of attempting to injure her behind her back, you are either purposely or unconsciously misrepresenting facts. I have never attempted to injure her behind her back; I distinctly deny the accusation. If I have ever spoken slightingly of the lady, I have done it with a fixed purpose—namely, for your own welfare, and not, as you seem to imagine, in order to blast her character.'

'And who gave you the right, Loftus, to constitute yourself my Mentor?' cries Grandby, pale with anger. 'Who gave you the right to preach what is right or wrong to me? I am not responsible to you for all my actions, and your attempting

to interfere on my behalf is a piece of unwarrantable presumption on your part. Your very attempt to palliate your offence against Miss Forsdyke is a dastardly insinuation against her character. What do you mean by implying that my welfare is at stake by being intimate with this young lady?'

'Grandby, Grandby, you are forgetting yourself,' says Loftus, in a warning tone. 'I must refuse to discuss this subject further, unless you can control your temper. We shall both be saying things presently which we shall afterwards regret.'

'I shall never regret having spoken as I have, in this lady's cause,' cries Grandby, hotly. 'It is not my custom to sit still and calmly hear a lady's good name taken away, without rising in her defence, whoever she may be—stranger or friend.'

'Excuse me one moment,' says Loftus, calmly—very calmly. 'I must again call your attention to the fact that you are exaggerating the case in point. You accuse me of attempting to deprive a young lady of her good name; I emphatically deny having done so. I may have spoken jestingly—sneeringly, if you like—of Miss

Forsdyke, but nothing more. And, in doing so, you may be certain that I have not spoken rashly. If you will forgive me mentioning the fact, Grandby, at this moment when we are both excited, I should like to say that my deep regard for the memory of your sister causes me to take a peculiar interest in your welfare—one which, apparently, you resent. And it was this feeling which prompted me to warn you pointedly, that possibly you were treading on dangerous ground. You may be certain that, in future, I shall not be so presumptuous as to offer you advice. But, before we leave the subject, let me once again warn you'

'I will not stand it any longer!' cries Grandby, jumping to his feet, beside himself with passion. 'Your every word is an insult to me, as well as to her, and I will not remain to listen to your low attack upon a defenceless girl's name.'

'I am extremely sorry, Grandby, to have so offended you,' says Loftus, quietly, looking very pale—but, before he can conclude his conciliatory sentence, Grandby has snatched up his hat and stick, and has left the room, without deigning to glance towards him.

For a long time, Loftus sits calm and thoughtful, all trace of the effects of champagne having disappeared under the excitement of the last few minutes. He is keenly alive to the fact that he has been spoken to in a way which no man has ever dared to do before. Grandby's insulting words, uttered in a moment of ungovernable temper, are still ringing in his ears, and the hot blush of shame mounts to his face as he considers how he has tamely listened to them without attempting to either retaliate or to extort an apology.

But there is another voice within him, struggling for the mastery—a voice, soft and gentle, reminding him of a pale, dead face, which he had loved in the inmost recesses of his heart four years before—a voice which exhorts him to forget the outrage, and to forgive the man. And, before the voice has pleaded many minutes, it has conquered, and he rises with a fixed resolve upon his face.

'For her sake, I will bear with him,' he murmurs, sadly. 'For her sake, I will see that no harm comes to him.'

CHAPTER VI.

CACKLE !

The excitement, consequent on the news of Colonel Stockton's flight, amongst the inmates of Banbury's Hotel is easier by far to imagine than to describe. Mrs. Lamb finds it an utter impossibility to retain such an important secret long. All through Monday she roams restlessly in and out of the house, longing yet not daring to impart her information to everyone she meets. She feels it ever present at the very tip of her tongue, only waiting for her to open her mouth, to seize on the opportunity to escape; and so it happens that, in spite of all her precautions, she cannot prevent herself from dropping various hints and inuendoes of a mysterious nature during the course of the day, which summed up in the aggregate present a fairly concise

explanation of the whole affair. There is quite a hectic flush upon her usually sallow countenance, and, before the evening arrives, she becomes really feverish from the effects of such an abnormal strain upon her mind. She is literally bursting to tell the news, and, after dinner that night, she can stand the anxiety no longer, but appeals to her husband, telling him that, unless she can impart the secret, she will assuredly become very ill.

'Then tell it by all means, my dear,' rejoins the major, laying down the *Pioneer* which he has been perusing. 'The old man is quite safe by this time. But, as far as I can see, you have already told every human soul at present in the hotel.'

'Oh! Charles, how can you be so unfair?' she exclaims, indignantly. 'What I have suffered to-day in having to hold my tongue is past all masculine comprehension! Told everyone indeed! Had I done so, my temperature would not be so high as it is at the present moment.'

'Well, my dear, perhaps you have not told anyone in particular the *whole* case—but people *will* put two and two together, you know; and if you go to one lady and

absence, and then to another and ask whether it be true that he had been seen riding madly along the Kashmir road, and then to a third with some mysterious allusion to husbands bolting from infuriated spouses—why, you must allow that, granting they be women of average intellect, it would not be very difficult for them to arrive at a fairly accurate conclusion.'

'And this is all the thanks I get for having worked myself into a high fever!' she exclaims, appealing dramatically to space. 'After all I have endured, to be branded as a gossip—as a woman who cannot keep a secret! Oh! Charles, I am sadly disappointed in you. Such ingratitude on your part is neither husbandly nor just.'

'Well, my dear, I am really very sorry,' he says, with an amused expression on his face. 'I only state what I observed. I wish to cast no imputations as to your being unable to retain a secret—for all I know, you may be as silent as the grave. But, if so, how do you account for Mrs. Andrews saying to me this afternoon, "Oh! Major Lamb, your wife has just been de-

scribing to me such an interesting little episode regarding Colonel Stockton!"'

'Ah! yes—well, perhaps I did tell Mrs. Andrews something of the truth,' says Mrs. Lamb, reflectively. 'She is such a great friend of mine, you know, that I couldn't have well kept it from her.'

'Oh! that was the reason, was it?' remarks the major, suavely. 'And what induced you to tell Mrs. Bird that the colonel was already three marches into Kashmir. She came to me for confirmation of the statement.'

'Oh! Mrs. Bird! Did I tell her that?' says Mrs. Lamb, confusedly. 'Well, perhaps I did mention something of the story to Mrs. Bird. You see we were so much together this morning that it was impossible for me not to refer to the matter in just a casual way, you know.'

'Ah!—yes, I quite understand,' says the major, gravely. 'It is so nice to have all these little matters explained satisfactorily. And, since we are on the subject, perhaps you might be able to tell me what caused you to confide to Mrs. Blewitt that probably, within a few hours, Mrs. Stockton would discover herself to be a grass-widow?'

'Now, Charles, don't be aggravating!' says Mrs. Lamb, tartly. 'And pray don't attempt to be sarcastic. Believe me it does not suit you. It is no good for a cooing dove to attempt to crow like a hawk,' she adds, with an air of having said something clever and original.

'Do hawks crow?' asks the major, mildly. 'What an extremely interesting ornithological fact, to be sure!'

'It pleases you to attempt to be facetious to-night,' she says, with mock politeness, 'I have often made the remark before that in my opinion facetious men are quite as detestable as playful elephants . . .'

'And I am sure that the remark is well worthy of repetition, dear,' interrupts the major, with a merry twinkle in his eye. 'I only trust that I shall live to hear it repeated many, many times.'

'I am sorry, Charles, that you are not in a very good temper, to-night,' says Mrs. Lamb, with an acid glance in his direction. 'I think that I will leave you for the present, and seek the more congenial atmosphere of the ladies' room. *There*, at any rate, I shall be treated like a lady. I hope

that when I return I shall find you more composed in mind.'

'My love, if you will only continue talking for another two minutes and a half,' he says, impressively, covering his face with the open newspaper, 'I have not the least doubt that I should be able to compose myself to sleep.' But Mrs. Lamb does not wait to hear his repartee; she whisks up her train with a sudden jerk, and leaves the room.

Her mind misgives her sadly on the subject of Colonel Stockton's flight. If her husband has really spoken the truth, then the secret is hers no longer; in spite of all her precautions, she must have unconsciously imparted it bit by bit until the whole is known. This is a terrific blow to her, for during the whole day she has been fondly picturing to herself the electrical effect that her announcement will produce. The thought that she, and she alone, is aware of Mrs. Stockton's desertion, has been an immense source of satisfaction to her, and it is extremely mortifying, now that the moment of disclosure has arrived, to discover that through her own imprudence the facts of the case have gradually leaked out in meagre drops instead of with one start-

ling rush such as she had fondly imagined to herself. She trusts, however, that her husband has exaggerated the facts of the case, and, full of hope, she repairs to the ladies' room.

She is not left long in doubt. She finds about a dozen ladies sitting round the room in solemn conclave, and, before she has entered the doorway, a dozen tongues assail her, clamouring for further details on the point in question.

Though considerably mortified at finding her worst fears realised, still she feels that her position might have been worse. The fact of the colonel's flight is known, but merely the bare fact without any accessory details, and it is gratifying to her vanity to find herself appealed to as the only lady really cognisant of the whole affair So she seats herself in their midst, and gives herself up wholly for the next quarter-of-an-hour to the rapturous task in hand, noting, with the keenest relish, the eagerness with which her companions hang upon her words. Yes—it is certainly a triumph, sitting there imparting bit by bit her superior information; and, warming to the work, she deftly inserts little touches of

extra colouring, suggested by her own imagination, adding startling effects to the already finished picture.

'I could have died with laughter,' she says, applying her brush with amazing audacity. 'I was standing by my half-opened door, when the manager arrived in answer to her summons. She walked into the passage and confronted him. "Where is my husband?" she said, purple with suppressed wrath. "Madam," said he, "I really do not know; I was quite unaware that he was absent." "If you don't find him before the evening," she answered, "I shall refuse to pay my bill—so you had better set to work at once;" saying which she retired again to her room, and slammed the door in his face.'

A murmur of applause greets the fair speaker on her delivery of this little piece of information. Every inmate of the room is conscious of feeling a sense of rapturous elation at the thought of Mrs. Stockton's discomfiture. They are one and all without exception hostilely inclined towards that disagreeable woman, for she has severally insulted them in various ways, during her sojourn in the hotel.

'Oh! tell us some more particulars,' chirrups little Mrs. Bird, in a voice of suppressed ecstasy. 'It is really quite the most delightful thing I have ever heard.'

Mrs. Lamb smiles graciously, and draws again on her fertile imagination. It never enters into her philosophy that her little gratuitous touches to the picture are unwarrantable. She has a good story to tell, and she feels that it is only due to her audience to serve it up in as palatable a form as possible.

'You know,' she says, 'the doctor came to see her this morning, for she has never quite recovered from her fall on Saturday, and he has prescribed for her perfect rest and solitude. She is to lie on a sofa for at least a week, and on no account to take any exercise. Talk about taking exercise! You should have just heard her rampaging round the room, after she slammed the door in the manager's face. I casually walked out on to the balcony, and enjoyed the situation immensely. She didn't strike me as being much of an invalid. From what I could hear, she seemed to be smashing the furniture literally to pieces, and oh!

—the language she used! It made me turn quite cold!'

'Oh! do tell us!' cries a chorus of eager voices.

'Oh! I really couldn't,' says Mrs. Lamb, diffidently. 'I couldn't bring myself to repeat it.'

'But you *must*, dear Mrs. Lamb,' says Mrs. Blewitt. 'Give us some idea of it in a modified way, you know. We are all together here, and none of us will be shocked, we promise you.'

Mrs. Lamb persists in her refusal. The whole story being an invention of her own, she finds herself in rather an awkward position; as for the moment she can recall no bad language to her mind, and her inventive faculty refuses to supply it. Then, suddenly, some pet phrases of her husband's flash across her memory, and she returns to her task with renewed self-assurance.

She gives a little cough, expressive of her disinclination to sully her fair lips with the repetition of anything so vulgar, and then, with a modest hesitation in her voice, she says,

'Well, if you *really* wish me to tell you . . .'

'We do—we do!' exclaims the chorus.

'Then—then, I heard her say—"Blast his eyes!"'

'Oh!' a little shriek of astonishment issues from the mouth of her eager audience.

'And—"Curse his skin!"'

'Oh!!'

'And—"Hell and fury!"'

'Oh!!!'

'And—and—"Thunder and bear's grease!"' cries Mrs. Lamb, desperately, racking her brains for expletives of the deadliest significance. 'Oh! it was simply awful! I wonder that she was not struck dead upon the spot, that I do!'

A rustle of horror permeates the room, followed by a buzz of excited voices, all commenting on the dreadful announcement at the same moment. How terrible! How shocking! How unladylike! How sinful! Mrs. Blewitt declares in a tone of suppressed rapture that she hardly can believe it; Mrs. Bird and Mrs. Andrews hold up their hands in virtuous indignation, exclaiming, 'Is it possible? It is nothing short of infamous!' whilst every other lady gives her own separate opinion on the subject, all confessing utter incredulity to anything so

monstrous, and yet, at the same time, all thoroughly believing it with a fervour worthy of a better cause.

Mrs. Lamb sits in their midst calm and silent, viewing their excitement with a patronising smile. This is one of the most triumphant moments of her life, and she strives her utmost to look unconcerned, feeling that an assumption of arrogance on her part, though perfectly justifiable considering the magnitude of the occasion, would neither be so becoming nor so effective as the adoption of a placid air of condescension.

When the excitement has somewhat abated, and silence is partially restored, Mrs. Lamb makes a proposal which strikes her audience dumb with astonishment. It is that the ladies in the hotel should combine together and send to Mrs. Stockton a round-robin requesting her, in the interests of the community, to take her departure from the hotel at an early date.

The proposition is received in solemn silence. The ladies look at one another, with a view to fathoming each other's opinion on the matter, so as to gain a clue to their own line of conduct; each one

resolving not to be the first to speak. There is something so audacious in the plan that none of them think it advisable to give an individual opinion until they see how it will be generally received. Mrs. Lamb experiences the most intense disappointment at this chilling reception to her scheme. From the excitement evinced by the company in general, she had imagined that they would have seized upon the idea as a heaven-born inspiration. Filled with a pitying contempt for the want of spirit which they display, she determines to press the point, and rises—yes, actually rises—to address the meeting.

'Ladies,' she says, in true platform style, 'the subject which I bring before you is one of too serious a character to be treated lightly, or to be hastily decided upon. Within this hotel there lives a—a—well, a lady, who by her objectionable manners and low vulgarities has made herself unpleasant not only to one of us—or two of us—but to the whole community.'

She pauses for a moment in her oration to ascertain the effect produced upon her audience, and she has the gratification of hearing Mrs. Bird murmur an assenting

approval. No one else utters a sound. The truth is, all the ladies assembled hold Mrs. Stockton in such mortal dread that they feel no inclination to submit their names to a paper of such a determined character as the one suggested by Mrs. Lamb. To abuse the lady behind her back they have not the slightest objection to doing—but to openly bring their persons under her displeasure is a very different pair of shoes—and they all resolve in their own minds to be extremely cautious as to what they do.

Mrs. Lamb, however, carried away by the excitement of the moment, has lost all her fears, and she now commences to instil into them a courage equal to the occasion.

'Are we to be publicly insulted in this manner?' she asks, in really admirable declamatory tones. 'Are we to be sat upon, and sneered at, and abused on all occasions by a woman wanting both in birth and breeding? Are we to banish common decency from our lives, and allow ourselves to be enveloped in an atmosphere of Billingsgate and St. Giles? I ask you, ladies, calmly and dispassionately, are these things to be?' and her audience,

warming beneath such grandiloquent language, give vent to a loud murmur in the negative.

'No—assuredly not!' continues Mrs. Lamb, excitedly, agreeably surprised at her own remarkable fluency, and intensely proud of the important *rôle* in which she finds herself. 'As ladies of delicate birth and culture, there cannot be one dissenting voice in this assembly. From our very cradles have we been raised in an atmosphere of high refinement, and are we now, on account of one low woman, to be submerged in a sea of coarse, vulgar, vile vituperation? Are our delicately-nurtured ears to be daily polluted by the indecent utterances of an ill-bred woman?'

This is really very fine. Mrs. Lamb, with flushed face and excited gesture, stands before them, a grand personification of courage and determination. How can they fail to be influenced by her words? To a woman they all unanimously express their heartiest approval.

'No, we will not stand it,' says Mrs. Andrews, boldly. 'We must adopt some preventive measures.'

'Exactly!' says Mrs. Lamb, impressively.

'We must all combine and make a stand against it. And how can this be done? Could we—ladies of gentle breeding and position—agree to give her sneer for sneer, to descend to low recrimination, to fight her with her own filthy weapons? Never! the idea is too painful and shocking to be mentioned. No—we must resort to other means, such as befits our station. All we require is peace and comfort for the future, and, to obtain this, we must induce her to leave the house. And this can only be effected safely by the method which I have just suggested—by means of a round-robin. Let us take a sheet of paper and, in courteous language, request her to depart; and let us all circumscribe our names, the one taking no precedence over the other.'

As she pauses, murmurs of the most unqualified approval arise in all directions. The courage of the ladies, during her brief harangue, has risen from zero to fever height. Feeling the truth of the maxim that '*l'union fait la force*,' they one and all rise equal to the situation, and they one and all, in the most vehement language, express their several opinions on the matter at the same moment. The oratorical

prowess displayed by Mrs. Lamb appears to have been contagious, for each lady is suddenly seized with a desire to address the meeting, and refuses absolutely to listen to anything offered by her neighbours. Then arises a perfect Babel of confused tongues.

The noise increases, and the excitement now passes all bounds. Mrs. Andrews seizes a sheet of paper, and commences to inscribe *her* idea as to how the round-robin should be written. Mrs. Bird protests, saying that the subject requires much further discussion before anything definite should be attempted. Mrs. Blewitt argues that too much discussion has already been wasted on the subject, and that it is necessary to act and not to talk, at which there is a sound of great approval throughout the room.

Mrs. Lamb moves about the room wildly gesticulating, imploring everyone to keep calm at such an important moment, as excess of excitement may be fatal. But to demand silence and to enforce it are two totally different matters, and the hubbub of voices increases every moment.

The point under such violent discussion

is whether there shall be or shall not be further discussion on the matter. Mrs. Bird heads the former party, Mrs. Blewitt the latter; and each one refuses to yield one iota from their expressed opinion.

Mrs. Lamb is in despair. Wringing her thin hands, with a hectic flush upon her sallow cheeks, she vainly exhorts them to show some observance to regulated order.

'Remember,' she cries, appealingly, 'that you are soldiers' wives, and, as such, you should not be ignorant of the true worth of discipline.'

But the battle rages long and furiously, and Mrs. Blewitt has to utilise to her utmost her powers of scathing repartee before the opposing party ultimately yields. And then there follows a great calm, for there is an unanimous consensus of opinion that the round-robin shall be drawn up, and despatched forthwith.

Mrs. Andrews nominates herself secretary to the meeting, at which various dissenting remarks arise as to the impropriety of her conduct in thus taking upon herself, unasked, such an important office. But, strong in the thought that the assumption of any high post must of necessity raise up

a host of envious tongues, Mrs. Andrews pays no heed to them, though she cannot prevent herself from overhearing Mrs. Blewitt's covert sneer on the question of 'people pushing themselves indecently to the front;' but as the remark is applied in a general way, without particularising any individual person, she thinks it better to pay no attention to it.

With an assumed look of unconcern, she pulls a sheet of paper towards her, and then, with a quill pen, draws upon it the nearest approach to a circle that her unpractised hand is capable of forming. The remaining ladies crowd round her, with the exception of Mrs. Blewitt, who stands somewhat aloof, beside the fire-place, with a contemptuous smile upon her face.

This lady's ardour in the cause is so great that she resents being placed in a subordinate position. Had she known Latin, she would probably have attuned her thoughts to the maxim of 'Aut Cæsar, aut nullus!'—but not being possessed of classical acquirements she contents herself with muttering at intervals in scornful tones *un*classical ejaculations, such as 'Rot!' and 'Twaddle!' She is a lady of

great strength of mind, and consequently much respected by the Banbury *côterie*, but, on the present occasion, the ladies are too much interested in the matter in hand to pay her the least attention.

'This,' says Mrs. Andrews, referring with pride to her design, 'is *my* idea upon the subject. Inside this circle, we write our request, and then all around we place our signatures, all converging on this centre point. Do you agree with me, Mrs. Lamb?'

'Rot!' says Mrs. Blewitt.

'Certainly, I do!' says Mrs. Lamb a little tartly, conscious of being for the moment deposed from the proud position of leader of the movement. 'There can be no question on the subject. As far as I know, there is only one way of forming a round-robin. I think the ladies present will agree with me that there is no need to discuss such a self-evident subject further.'

'Rot!' says Mrs. Blewitt.

'Oh! certainly,' cries a chorus of excited voices. 'We have no time to waste in useless discussion. Let us set to work in earnest at once.'

'Rot!' says Mrs. Blewitt.

'That is just what I am doing,' explains Mrs. Andrews, a trifle unamiably, annoyed at the thought that her exposition of her idea has been termed, 'useless discussion.' 'If you will only have a little patience, I will have the thing completed in a moment. The only question to decide upon is the wording of the sentence. Has any lady any suggestion to make?'

Has any lady any suggestion to make! What a question to ask? Every lady in the room has not only one suggestion to make, but twenty, and they are all offered at the same moment, rendering it impossible for Mrs. Andrews to detach a single coherent syllable. But far above the din, at equal intervals, can be heard the clear voice of Mrs. Blewitt scornfully exclaiming, 'Rot!' She feels in her heart that, had *she* the paper before her, she could settle the whole affair in half-a-moment, and her contempt for the hideous babbling of tongues is plainly depicted on her face.

After an animated discussion of great length, during the course of which it is sad to have to record that two ladies actually descended to the use of personal

invective, something definite is agreed upon, and, amidst a perfect *furore* of excitement, Mrs. Andrews commences to write it down.

'Ladies,' she says, rising on the completion of her task. 'I will just read it over. It runs as follows.'

'Rot!' says Mrs. Blewitt, with supreme contempt.

'I beg your pardon—did you speak?' says Mrs. Andrews, goaded to madness, turning sharply round.

'Yes,' says Mrs. Blewitt, with a burst of satirical laughter. 'I did speak. I said "Rot," and now I beg leave to repeat the remark.'

A flush of anger illumines Mrs. Andrews' face, and she is on the point of retorting, when she is prevented by a chorus of eager voices begging her to confine her attention to the matter in hand.

'Very well, ladies,' she says, 'it runs as follows:

'Madame, the ladies residing in Banbury's Hotel combine together to respectfully request that'

Her voice suddenly falters and dies out;

a most unexpected interruption has occurred.

The door has opened, and, to the horror of those assembled, on the threshold is standing Mrs. Stockton herself, dressed in a most striking *déshabille*. Apparently she has just risen from her bed, for she is clothed in a thick peignoir of faded blue, which clings tightly about her unsightly figure, disclosing plainly that there is next to nothing underneath. Upon her head is an old white night-cap, not too beautifully clean and neat, and the fringe which usually adorns her forehead has entirely disappeared.

She stands for a moment in the doorway, viewing the scene within with a look of grim vindictiveness upon her face, and then she walks into the room, and calmly takes a seat.

'Don't let me disturb you, ladies,' she says, with a savage snort. 'Pray continue your little entertainment! As I find it impossible to go to sleep with this unseemly noise so near me, I have come to join your festive gathering.'

Not a sound is heard; no one attempts to

speak. The ladies, some of whom are quite pale with fright, look into each other's faces guiltily, not knowing what to do, but all devoutly longing to escape. Mrs. Andrews hastily crunches up the damnatory paper and transfers it to her pocket, whilst Mrs. Lamb, vainly attempting to present a bold appearance, looks the very picture of dismay. Mrs. Blewitt alone seems to retain her presence of mind; without displaying a trace of agitation upon her scornful countenance, she stands leaning with one arm against the mantelpiece, smiling derisively at the terror-stricken faces of her companions.

The silence in the room is so complete that each one is conscious of the beating of her own heart—and still it continues, no one capable of uttering a syllable.

Suddenly a murmuring sound arises from the further quarter of the room. It is Mrs. Andrews speaking, and she is understood to be expressing her intention of retiring to bed. She has played three sets of tennis that afternoon, and consequently is feeling rather tired, she says, and then, with an inclination of her head to the assembled company, she retires from the room with more speed than grace. Mrs. Stockton bows her

head in mock politeness, and as the door closes behind her she lets fall, in a sepulchral voice, the word 'One!'

A second lady is now heard remarking on the lateness of the hour, and with a little bow she retires. Mrs. Stockton bowing in return utters, in the same sepulchral tone, the word 'Two!'

At this juncture, Mrs. Bird discovers that she is feeling very tired, and, faintly murmuring good-night, she beats a hasty retreat not waiting to close the door behind her. Mrs. Stockton says 'good-night,' and then counts 'Three!'

The situation is most embarrassing. There is something terrible in that grim old woman sitting there counting the several exits in that sepulchral tone. Under the influence of this fearful apparition, the courage of the company has sunk again to zero. They feel it impossible to regain their ease, and with one accord the remaining eight make for the door—and disappear.

Mrs. Stockton gives vent to a loud chuckle of delight, and then says, in the same tone as before, 'Three and eight are eleven!'

Only Mrs. Lamb and Mrs. Blewitt now remain. The former sees her forces deserting her with a sinking heart, but her pride prevents her from utterly succumbing. She is determined that none of them shall be witness to her weakness, so she vainly attempts to appear at ease, fully resolved to remain to the very last. Oh! how she wishes she were out of it! But she dare not go, with Mrs. Blewitt in the room. She feels that, after such bravado as she has displayed that evening, a show of cowardice on her part at this crisis would lower her irrevocably in the opinion of her clique. She would become the laughing-stock of the hotel, and would never again be able to raise her voice as an authority on any subject. So with a palpitating heart she stands there longing for the opportunity to arrive when she may make an honourable retreat.

Mrs. Blewitt, with a smile of scorn upon her face, is on the other hand not in the least discomposed by the awkwardness of the situation. Calmly and collectedly, she holds her ground, viewing the scene before her with a look of mingled amusement and derision.

Neither of the three ladies speak. Mrs. Stockton moves with ominous impatience in her chair, glancing wrathfully in their direction. Mrs. Lamb dare not meet her eye, but Mrs. Blewitt gives her a long steady stare with a contemptuous sneer upon her well-formed lips.

Tick—tick—goes the clock with exasperating monotony, and still neither lady says a word. Every swing of that pendulum increases Mrs. Stockton's fierce impatience. She looks towards it, and finds it is on the stroke of twelve.

'Am I to get no rest to-night?' she growls. 'Three and eight are eleven.'

Mrs. Blewitt glides gracefully towards her.

'Good-night, Mrs. Stockton,' she says, in a voice of honeyed sweetness. 'Your knowledge of arithmetic is really wonderful. As you say, three and eight are eleven, and one is twelve. I will not trouble you to count my departure,' and, with a smile and a little bow, she leaves the room.

Mrs. Stockton casts after her a glare of impotent rage, and then she turns her eyes and fixes them full on Mrs. Lamb, who vainly tries to summon up sufficient cour-

age to say good-night. But her tongue literally refuses to utter a sound, and, what is worse, her feet seem suddenly glued to the floor, and she is unable to stir a step. Alone in the presence of her enemy she presents indeed a pitiable sight. She is conscious of the fact, and inwardly thanks providence that there is no one there to witness it.

Suddenly Mrs. Stockton rises and walks towards her.

'Mrs. Lamb,' she says, in a voice trembling with passion, 'tell me this instant where my husband is.'

At the sound of her voice the spell is broken. Uttering a little nervous shriek, and without attempting to conceal her fright, Mrs. Lamb turns round and bolts precipitately from the room. Fleeing like a hunted hare out of the door and along the corridor, she finally reaches her own room, where she immediately falls into her ayah's arms in a violent fit of hysterics, frightening that good woman clean out of her senses, in so far that she drops her fair burden on the floor, and, running screaming out of the room, arouses the whole hotel with her discordant cries.

CHAPTER VII.

L'AMENDE HONORABLE.

In the spring-time of the year, Nature relieves her feelings of the last remnant of her wintry agitation by giving way to sudden fits of fury which for the moment are overwhelming in their intensity, but which die out as suddenly as they arise, leaving a great after-calm which is not untinged with melancholy. And these sudden paroxysms of passion in no way resemble those sullen bursts of rage to which she is addicted at other seasons of the year, when for days before she nourishes her hatred, and, growling ominously in the distance, refuses to strike until she has collected all her forces around her, and is certain of the efficacy of her blow. The one is involuntary, the other is premeditated. The one leaves no trace of harm behind, the other

is deadly destructive in its revengeful course.

And Nature in this respect is imitated by the tempests which rock the human mind. As in Nature, so in the human mind, are to be discovered two distinct varieties of passion—the one harmless in its fierce impetuosity, the other highly injurious in its deliberate malignancy.

The burst of anger to which Grandby has given way in the presence of his friend is of the former character. It comes upon him with the sudden violence of a whirlwind, and for the moment he is mad, heedless as to what he says or does—and yet, before he has even emerged from the club enclosure, the fiery tempest within him has abated, and he is calm and cool again, wondering in amazement at his own inexplicable behaviour. What he has exactly said to Loftus he cannot now remember, for with the disappearance of his strange excitement all recollection of the words which he has used seem to have deserted him; but he is conscious that he has used insulting phrases, and the thought causes his olive skin to flush with shame.

Why has he behaved so strangely?

What subtle force has caused him to act in a way so foreign to his usual line of conduct? He asks himself this question in perplexity as he hurriedly strides up the hill. As far back as he can remember, he cannot recall one single instance of his having so totally lost control over himself as on this present occasion. His natural temperament, he knows, is mild and placid, utterly devoid of irritability, and he is lost in amazement as he considers how completely he has forgotten himself, in so far that he has even allowed his tongue to insult a friend. For that Loftus is his friend he has no doubt He is conscious that the feeling he bears towards him is more than that of mere acquaintanceship; his every word and gesture plainly discloses that fact—and as he recalls the softened expression which fell across his face as he was relating the history of Talbot's death, and remembers the noble part which he played in that pathetic drama, his sorrow for his recent conduct approaches to remorse.

There is one point on which he refuses to allow his mind to work—and that is the personality of Miss Forsdyke. He puts

her outside the question. He merely argues to himself that he has lost his temper, for no adequate reason, with a friend, and that it is his duty consequently to apologise.

Walking along, mentally analysing the reason of his strange outburst of temper, a sudden consciousness comes upon him, which makes his ears tingle with very shame. It strikes upon his senses with the suddenness of a flash of lightning, disclosing to him without a doubt the force which has moved him to behave so strangely. He tries to stifle the insinuation; he dare not confess its truth; he attempts to argue it away, but all in vain. It still remains, and every moment it assumes a more decided form. And it is this—that he himself is conscious that *his own* faith in Miss Forsdyke's integrity has been shaken by the repeated insinuations cast against her character.

From the first moment that he has made enquiries concerning her, he has been met with covert innuendoes and slighting allusions to her person, and in spite of all his efforts to treat them with contempt, he knows that they have left traces of their insidious sting behind them.

He understands his conduct now. He had resorted to violence, merely to fortify his heart against its sudden weakness. He had, in fact, been angry with himself for having allowed himself to entertain such a prejudice against his sister-friend, and he had been violent towards his friend for having assisted to create such a doubt within him.

A sense of great shame takes possession of him, as this idea unfolds itself. What is it that he has done? In spite of his fervent assurances ever to regard her as a sister, to be her perfect friend, to stand forth her champion against all foes, he has allowed his mind to be influenced by scandalous report: before a week has passed, his chivalrous faith in the purity of her being has wavered, and he has proved himself a coward—a man unworthy to possess her love and confidence!

How can he atone to her for such treachery? In what way can he prove to her and to himself that he is thoroughly repentant for having momentarily wavered in his allegiance?

In great bitterness of spirit, he lays bare the contemptible nature of his conduct, in-

wardly reproaching himself for not having a firmer control over the irresolution of his character. That the doubt which he has conceived concerning her was but of a moment's duration, does not in the least, in his opinion, mitigate the magnitude of the sin he has committed. He only feels that, in having harboured doubt, though only for a moment, he has proved himself quite unworthy to partake in that great friendship which they had planned.

And, thus thinking, he forms two determinations: firstly, to write to Loftus, humbly apologising for his conduct; secondly, to confess fully to Miss Forsdyke the fact of his momentary disloyalty.

The letter to Loftus is not a hard one to write; it requires no effort of mind to form those few simple phrases, in which he expresses his regret for his hastiness that morning. It is not a matter of flowery language; he merely writes plainly and concisely a note of which any gentleman might be proud; and having sealed it and directed it, he gives it to his servant with injunctions to take it to the club at once.

It is as though a great weight had been taken off his mind, as he sees his servant

depart to do his bidding. He has no fears as to the result of his little note. He has gauged his friend's character too well, not to understand that it possesses none of the ingredients which combine to form sulkiness or malice. He knows that Loftus will be pleased beyond measure to mend the breach. He has asked him to dine with him on the morrow, to join hands again in good-fellowship over a bottle of champagne, and he is convinced that he will come.

But the task which he has before him with reference to Miss Forsdyke is of a more difficult character. How she will receive his confession he does not know. There is the possibility that she may for ever lose all faith in the sincerity of his devotion ; but, from what he knows of her character, he does not think this probable. That she will experience a sense of the keenest disappointment, on hearing of his want of fealty, he does not doubt, for he fully comprehends how thoroughly she has set her heart upon the friendship which they have agreed to form. But never for a moment does he waver in his resolve to confess his fault. It may be quixotic ; it may be carrying his sense of right to an

absurd extreme, but still he means to do it. He feels, until he has unburdened his mind and asked her pardon, that he can never again be at ease in her presence; he would be ever haunted with the knowledge of his treachery, and all sense of harmony in their intercourse would in consequence disappear.

Miss Forsdyke meets him that afternoon with outstretched hands, and with a smile of girlish innocence on her charming little face, which makes him trebly conscious of the wrong which he has done her, in having doubted her for a moment. It requires no experience in character-reading to perceive at a glance that no deceit or sinful thoughts could ever have found a dwelling-place within that sunny open countenance.

He eagerly seizes her hands, and raises them to his lips.

'Diana,' he says, 'I fear that again I have kept you waiting. How can I prove to you my contrition for being so unpunctual?'

'I do not want any proof,' she says, brightly. 'I can see it in your eyes. The anxiety of waiting is more than compensated by your appearance, however late it

may be. Now, you have held my hand quite long enough—so let go, and sit down there. I am quite certain that you have been delayed against your will,' she adds, confidently, as she sinks down beside him on the soft, green turf.

'Yes, you are right,' he answers, gravely. 'Do you know, that this afternoon I have had a severe quarrel with one of my best friends?'

'A quarrel!' she says, in a surprised tone. 'What on earth about? I thought that men prided themselves on never quarrelling.'

'As a rule, they do—but this was quite exceptional. I was foolish enough to completely lose my temper, and I am afraid that I was not only bad-tempered, but insulting.'

'Oh! Frank, how could you so far forget yourself?' she murmurs, reproachfully. 'I cannot imagine *you* losing your temper. To me, you seem to be superior to all the petty failings of the human frame. I feel assured that you must have had great provocation.'

She looks at him with a world of sympathy in her liquid eyes, but he dare not

meet her glance. She implies only too clearly by her words the great belief she has in the nobility of his character, and the knowledge that he is undeserving of her trust cuts him to the quick.

'Tell me who it was?' she says, noting his unwillingness to speak. 'I feel certain that, with a little tact, it will all come right again.'

'It was with Mr. Loftus.'

'Mr. Loftus!' she repeats, nervously, and a sudden flush of colour lightens up her cheek. 'What *could* you have quarrelled with him about?'

'Can you not guess, Diana?' he says, raising his eyes to meet her face.

A rush of crimson sweeping across her face and neck tells him that she understands his meaning.

'Frank!' she says, leaning forward, and resting her hand upon his knee, 'do you mean that it was about *me* you quarrelled?'

He nods his head in silent assent.

'About *me?*' she cries, with a sudden tremor in her voice. 'Did he try to—to set you against me? Ah! Frank, tell me that you did not listen to his cruel words.'

She looks up into his face with an ap-

pealing glance, her lips quivering with suppressed emotion, and two tears glisten in her lovely eyes. There is a depth of pleading in that pathetic glance, which quite unmans him, and he seizes her hand and passionately presses his lips upon it.

'Diana!' he cries, hurriedly, 'you must never doubt me. My affection for you is far too strong to be ever influenced by the base inuendoes of your enemies. How it happens that *you* have enemies is quite beyond my comprehension, for to me you are everything that is pure and gentle—and lovable.'

She gently draws her hand away.

'Tell me what he said,' she whispers. 'In what way did he slander me?'

'He did not slander you,' he answers, gravely. 'Mr. Loftus is too much of a gentleman ever to invent calumnies against a woman. If I have led you to imagine that such was the case, it was quite unintentional. What he said to me was simply a few words of warning against being too much in your society, and, in giving me the advice, he hinted that he was actuated merely by the interest which he took in my welfare. What he meant, I do not

know, unless he fancied that I was drifting into a foolish flirtation with you, which might bring us both to harm. Of course he can know nothing of the true character of our friendship. But, whatever he meant, I was foolish enough to resent his words, and I completely lost my temper; and I left him. That was all, Diana.'

'And for my sake!' she says, in tones of unutterable sadness. 'You quarrelled with him for me! Ah! Frank, my brother, am I worth such a sacrifice? Is it right that I should be the means of separating you from your friend like this?'

'But there will be no separation,' he cries, eagerly. 'I am certain that he will bear me no grudge, now that I have apologised.'

'Ah! you have apologised?'

'Yes, of course I have—I wrote it directly I arrived home. Surely you will agree that I acted rightly in making the *amende honorable?*'

She turns away her head, and plucks nervously at the grass, tearing out the blades by handfuls.

'Yes—yes, of course,' she answers, hurriedly, 'you could not have done otherwise.'

For a moment there is silence, and then she suddenly turns to him, trembling with emotion.

'Frank,' she cries, passionately, 'you *must* tell me exactly what he said—it is your duty to me to do so; I cannot bear to think that you may be prejudiced in any way against me. It is only right that I should have the chance of defending myself against these unknown aspersions on my character. You say that I must never doubt you, that your affection for me is too strong to be ever influenced by report. But how can I help doubting, when I am not even aware of the sin of which I am accused? Strive as you may, these slanders against me must leave some impression on your mind. Frank, my brother, can you assure me from the bottom of your heart that such is not the case?'

'You are right, Diana,' he says, and a great lump seems to rise in his throat, making it difficult for him to articulate a word. 'What you suspect has happened. To-day, on analysing my mind, to my horror I discovered that these repeated insinuations had left an impression on my mind.'

'Ah!'

A cry breaks from her lips, which startles him; it is like the last despairing note of a hunted bird.

'Tell me,' she says, with a sudden gasp, 'how low I have sunk in your opinion.'

'Sunk!' he cries, in a deeply agitated tone. 'Diana, you have risen a hundredfold. I cannot describe to you the utter loathing I have for myself in having yielded to the breath of calumny. But it was only for a moment. Diana, believe me that, when I discovered that I had entertained a doubt against you, I was completely overwhelmed. It was quite without my knowledge that the insidious poison had acted on my heart. And oh! —my darling sister—I plucked it out—I tore it out—I covered myself with self-reproaches and contempt. Ah! Diana, try to believe in me again. I could not rest until I had confessed to you my weakness; I felt, until I told you all, that I should never dare to look you in the face again.'

He moves close beside her, and grasps her by the hand.

'Diana,' he whispers, fiercely, 'are you

angry with me? Do you utterly despise me? Do you think that I too do not suffer for my weakness? Do you think that I feel no bitter self-reproach for having so degraded myself? Ah! Diana, if you cannot believe in me—if you feel unable to place perfect trust in me—our friendship must of necessity die. It cannot live, unless we have perfect faith in one another. In you I have perfect faith, and as for me—I have failed you once—though only for a moment. Can you not forgive me? Can you not overlook it, and accept my earnest assurances that it will never occur again?'

There is a ring of pathetic pleading in his tones which it is impossible to resist. She feels his warm breath playing about her face, panting fiercely in his agitation, and she knows that she loves him with all the passionate *abandon* of her warm impulsive nature. With an effort she masters her inclination to throw her arms around him. For a moment she struggles violently to control the beatings of her heart, and then she turns towards him, and places her hand upon his arm.

'Frank,' she says, with a wintry smile,

inexpressibly touching in its sadness, 'if I were to lose you now, I believe that I should die. Before you entered into my life I never knew what happiness really meant, and I existed simply because I had never known a brighter lot. But now all is different. You have come, you have entwined yourself about my heart, you have made me understand the joys of a perfect love, you have roused me from my torpid apathy and have instilled into me a new life, you have made of me a different being—and if you were now to leave me I should surely die. I could not again return to that old friendless life—the contrast to what is now would make it doubly terrible to what it seemed before. Ah! Frank—do not leave me—do not forsake me! Be my friend—and let me live.'

Her voice changes from sadness to a tone of passionate entreaty. Her arms fold round his neck, and she brings her face close to his, looking up into his eyes with a glance of such pathetic tenderness that he feels his strength of mind utterly deserting him. A film comes across his eyes, a choking sensation rises in his throat, and then—he draws the little head towards

him, and kisses it fiercely on the forehead, cheek, and lips—kisses it with an intensity of feeling that frightens him.

'Believe me, trust in me!' he cries. 'I have failed once, but never shall again—I swear it. Let us begin afresh our great friendship—let us solemnly vow to one another to be always faithful. Diana, let me hear you say that you forgive me—that you no longer have any doubts concerning me.'

She gently disengages herself from his close embrace. Upon both her cheeks there is a flush of warm colour, which heightens the marvellous beauty of her face, giving to it a charming air of modesty.

'There is nothing to forgive,' she says, simply, placing her hand in his. 'As I understand the case, it was quite unconsciously on your part that you entertained a doubt against me. On becoming aware of it, you rejected it with scorn. Instead of being contemptible, Frank, I think that your conduct has been noble. You say you have heard *repeated* insinuations against my character. Is it to be wondered at that they should in time have made some impression on your mind? It is only

natural that they should. If one hears a remark repeated often, it is certain that it will finally become imprinted on the mind, however much one may wish to reject it. But it was only as long as you gave no thought to the matter that this impression remained. As soon as you considered the subject, you discovered that it was in reality akin to doubt, and you spurned it. Is not this, Frank, something like your case?'

'You have stated it exactly,' he cries, eagerly. 'But you have put it in such a kind way that I barely recognise it.'

'Well, then, we will drop the subject for ever and aye,' she says, sadly, gently closing her fingers round his hand. 'My trust in you is not shaken in the least—in fact, I feel that this explanation will draw us even closer together than before. And now, Frank, you must tell me what people say against me. It seems so strange that even I, living the secluded life I do, should not escape the breath of scandal.'

'It is monstrous!' he cries, indignantly. 'In this cursed country, no woman's reputation is safe from being tarnished. However good and pure she may be, there is

sure to be found some one to throw the mud. What can be the motive, other than the gratification of personal spite, I cannot say. The value of a woman's honour seems to be very little recognised in India.'

'What you say is true, I know,' she murmurs, sadly. 'One is so accustomed in this country to hear women's characters impugned that it really begins to lose its deadly significance. It is a case of familiarity breeding indifference. But I had fondly imagined that I was one of the few young ladies who had escaped from that martyrdom. As far as I know, I have never offended a single human being—except—except, perhaps, Mr. Loftus, and I cannot imagine what they have to say against me.'

'Well, I am thankful to say that in your case they never dare to particularize,' he says, pleased beyond measure to see that she is somewhat recovering her spirits. 'They only mumble in a general way of having heard some report against you at some time or other. Even Major Lamb, on the first night of my arrival, when I asked him who you were, made some allusion to it. It is the stock-phrase for an

old Anglo-Indian scandal-monger when he is at a loss for something definite to say. How they can so degrade themselves, I can't conceive. In my opinion, a woman's name should be the most sacred thing on earth; to treat it lightly is to prove oneself devoid of every spark of manliness, and of every instinct of a gentleman. But tell me, Diana—how did you ever offend Loftus?'

'Oh! it was nothing,' she says, in an embarrassed tone, turning modestly away. 'It was some time ago now. We knew one another pretty well then, and one day he took a liberty with me which I resented. He was very angry afterwards, but I did not think him capable of nourishing his wrath so long. But oh, Frank!' she adds, in a voice of alarm, 'you must promise me not to tell him that I mentioned the fact. It would not be fair to him.'

'Diana, you are an angel of goodness,' he exclaims, in a voice of rapture. 'You know that he has been warning me against you, and yet—you are afraid of doing what would be unfair to him.'

'I bear him no grudge,' she says, with a sweet sadness, 'though I confess I am

afraid of him. I do hope, Frank, that you will not encourage him to talk of me. I wish that I could make you promise——'

'Promise what?' he interposes, eagerly.

'Promise that you will never allow the mention of my name between you. Would it be too much to ask of you?' and she looks at him with a pleading little smile.

'I will willingly promise it, Diana,' he answers, quickly. 'I will make an agreement with him that henceforth your name is to be a forbidden subject. But you must not doubt me now,' he adds, in an anxious tone.

'No, I do not doubt you,' she answers, with a happy smile. 'It is only that I dislike thinking that you ever hear a word said against me. To know that you bear me a true affection is the one happiness of my life, and I do not want to have any of my real or imaginary imperfections brought obtrusively before your eyes.'

'You have no imperfections,' he cries, confidently. 'Verily, Diana, I believe that you are one of the few perfect creatures on this earth!'

CHAPTER VIII.

LOFTUS REFUSES TO BE BOUND.

On arriving home that evening, Grandby finds an answer awaiting him from Loftus, which, viewed as a work of art, is not a masterpiece of composition, but, as a type of the eccentric character of the writer, may perhaps be considered worthy of record here.

It runs as follows:

'Dear old Chap,

'Your note has surprised me greatly—in fact, to-day is a red-letter day in my uneventful life. Literally, three times during the course of the day have I felt surprise—firstly, on discovering myself to possess energy enough to lose my temper; secondly, on finding myself engaged in an argument of a delightfully exciting turn;

and now, thirdly, on receiving your amusing note. Considering that it is to you that I am indebted for having experienced this pleasurable sensation of *surprise*, not only once but actually thrice, in less than so many hours, I am at a loss to understand in what way you can imagine yourself to be my debtor. Believe me, my dear boy, you owe me nothing! So, in accepting what you have so kindly sent me, you must understand that I regard it not as the repayment of a debt, but as a gift which you, in the goodness of your heart, have given me—and, as such, you may be certain that I shall never cease to value it. I will be with you at half-past seven to-morrow. Try to arrange, like a good chap, that I can neither see, hear, nor be personally aware in any way of the proximity of Mother Stockton.

'Yours sincerely,

'VERNON LOFTUS.

'P.S.—My stud will parade themselves before your critical gaze to-morrow at half-past nine.'

Grandby fully appreciates the fine spirit

of the writer. Having read it through twice, he folds it up, and carefully places it in a drawer, to be kept there by him amongst his little collection of private treasures.

Punctual to the moment, on the following evening, Loftus appears, with a smile upon his good-humoured face, and a gardenia in his button-hole. He seats himself beside Grandby, with Mrs. Lamb on his other hand, to that silly lady's extravagant delight. She blushes and smiles and smirks, and greedily drinks in his nonsensical flow of language with a look of coquettish archness, which would have been found very trying to the gravity of any man with any sense of humour. But Loftus is too well seasoned to so commit himself. In thorough inward enjoyment of the situation he lays himself out to be exceptionally agreeable, and in so far succeeds that she succumbs utterly to his charming fascinations, and when, in a low whisper, with the gravity of a Queen's Counsel and with an earnestness worthy of a better cause, he confides to her that she is the prettiest woman he has ever seen, she—poor, silly, deluded creature—actually believes him. Oh! inex-

tinguishable Vanity, what a priceless boon thou art! Without thee, weaving thy distorting web before our eyes, half mankind would die from self-disgust!

Loftus is thoroughly versed in the art of flirting. To him it is no mere frivolous pastime of the moment, it is a science; and for the last ten years of his life he has devoted much of his time to the acquirement of an intimate knowledge of all its different shades and phases. By dint of great experience, he has reduced the dangerous diversion to a system, calm, methodical, and harmless. He has divided it and subdivided it into sections and varieties, marking clearly the limit not to be exceeded in every case, according to the tone and character of his fair enslaver for the moment. In some cases license, in others restraint, but in none entanglements of an unpleasant nature.

Born into the world with a natural gift for the fascinating pursuit, he took to it from his very cradle with an ease and grace that astounded his simple, doting parents. It is difficult to credit, but it is none the less true, that, at the age of ten he had the audacity to fall head over ears

in love with an apple-woman of truly magnificent proportions, who kept a stall at the top of Portland Place, in which exclusive quarter the noble lord, his father, lived at certain periods of each year. And it was through this unfortunate passion on his part that he was one day suddenly seized with choleraic symptoms, brought on from a surfeit of unripe fruit, for it was his custom to stand enchained before the booth of his enchantress, utterly regardless as to the quality or quantity of the fruit he ate. It is needless to say that this alarming attack effectually cured him of his passion; for the heart-ache is apt to be forgotten when one's interior brings itself obtrusively into notice. How is it possible to feel sentimental when undergoing the torture of a prosaic colic?

After this experience he conceived a rooted distaste to full-blown charms, and his susceptible heart transferred its affections to the daughter of the house next door, and he tore himself and his clothes to pieces in clambering on to a ridge of broken glass, from which uncomfortable and elevated position he was able to catch an occasional glimpse of his second love.

In fact, the tenderness of his feelings led him into countless dangers of every imaginable description, and his fond parents, who were, in spite of their exalted worldly rank, of the evangelical persuasion, at last began to view his amatory freaks with a less fond eye. Instead of continuing to smile indulgently at his *gratifying forwardness*, they began to frown ominously at his *reprehensible precocity*. But when, at the age of thirteen, he was discovered kissing the under-housemaid in the boot-house, they were both amazed and shocked at his *indecent shamelessness*. It was decided that Vernon Loftus should be sent to school at once for two distinct purposes—for the attainment of knowledge, and for the elevation of his moral tone.

At school, it is needless to say, neither purpose was effected. He obtained knowledge certainly, and to an extraordinary degree, but it was knowledge of the world, which came to him from external sources and not from the application to books in class—the elevation of his moral tone never came at all. In fact, it may be stated (it was generally published at the time, so it is no breach of confidence on the part of the

author to make mention of it now,) that at the age of sixteen he very narrowly escaped expulsion for having been detected corresponding in a tender fashion with a certain barmaid of unenviable notoriety in the town; on hearing of which escapade, his noble lordship and his noble spouse lost all remnant of faith in their only son, and openly expressed their belief that he would go utterly to the dogs (of course, be it understood, in the most choice and delicate of phraseology), and bring their grey hairs in sorrow to the grave. And so it was an agreeable surprise to them when he not only passed into Sandhurst, but actually passed well—though it must be confessed that his mother took all the credit of his achievement to herself, in having prayed morning and evening for five whole years, that her son should turn again to the paths of righteousness.

At Sandhurst the cloak of manhood fell upon him, and, following the example of St. Paul, he determined to put away childish things—in that he no longer conducted his *affaires-de-cœur* in an open manner, but concealed them by the adoption of a convenient caution which strongly resembled fraudu-

lent deceit. His parents were charmed at this apparent return on his part to godliness, and his mother added a thanksgiving prayer to her already lengthy matins and even-song.

In course of time he passed through Sandhurst, and joined his regiment, and so skilful did he become in the art of concealing that which was best concealed, and of parading that which was most fitted to be seen, that never a breath of reproach was cast against his name. And so it was that, when he sailed for India, his mother's heart quite broke down before the agonising thought of losing her dear, pure, immaculate only son. And on the pathetic occasion of farewell his character came out nobly grand. With lips quivering with emotion, in the presence of both his parents, he solemnly promised to lead a godly life. Ah! it was a touching and convincing sight! Seven days afterwards he kissed his major's wife in the chronometer-room of Her Majesty's troop-ship, *Malabar!*

But, as is the custom with his kind, though always engaged in desperate flirtations, he never entertained the idea of engaging himself for holy wedlock. He

loved intrigue with all its attendant joys, but he had a hearty loathing for the married state. Conscious that the society of *women* was essential to his happiness, he wisely resolved not to bind himself for life to one. To his keen sense of taste, the flavour of flirtation was very different from that of matrimony; the one resembled nectar, the other a rhubarb draught.

On this particular evening he applies himself very diligently to the amusement of Mrs. Lamb, and that sprightly lady laughs hysterically at some of his quaintly-told stories—some of which, it cannot be concealed, are of a decidedly *risqué* flavour. But then Loftus has such a charming mode of expression that the broadest anecdotes appear at the time simply as racy bits of humour; it is only afterwards, on consideration, that their true significance begins to dawn on the intelligence.

No reference is made to the dispute of the day before by either Loftus or Grandby until they are standing in the moonlight bidding each other good-night. Then Grandby touches on the subject, expressing his great pleasure on the truly unfortunate event having had such a happy ter-

mination. At the same time, remembering his promise to Miss Forsdyke, he mentions to his friend his wish that in future her personality should be a forbidden topic of discussion between them.

'I am certain that it would be for the best,' he says, earnestly, 'if we place Miss Forsdyke beyond the range of our conversation, we shall never disagree at all.'

'My dear boy,' says Loftus, grasping him heartily by the hand, 'I must remind you that this is a free country, and consequently I cannot allow any restrictions to be put upon my tongue. I will remember your wish, and will respect it—but I shall reserve to myself the right to violate it, if in my own opinion an occasion of sufficient gravity to warrant such a course should present itself. Good-night, old chap—I have had a very pleasant evening. Pity that Mrs. Lamb isn't a decade or two younger! As you say, I don't think there is much chance of our falling-out again. But if we do—what matter. We have only to make it up again—a good excuse, in fact, for a bottle of prime champagne. Mind you come and see me soon. Au revoir—ta, ta!' and he turns

away with an airy motion of the hand, and disappears with quite an energetic stride, leaving Grandby standing in the moonlight with a shade of half-annoyance on his striking face.

CHAPTER IX.

THE FRIENDSHIP PROGRESSES.

A WEEK passes, and the great platonic friendship leaves the bud, and blossoms into flower. It is a wondrous plant, with petals well-expanded, unique and beautiful, becoming daily more pleasing to the senses, and ever presenting some fresh attraction to the two young people engaged in fostering its growth.

It has been a grand conception—this idea of a platonic friendship, and Grandby feels not a little satisfied as he contemplates the success of his creation. For it has succeeded beyond his utmost expectations. He has formed a friendship on strict platonic lines with a pure and lovely girl; he has found in her a kindred spirit, such as he has often longed to meet; he has been able, under the influence of her

ready sympathy, to divest himself of his misanthropical reserve, and to look the world in the face with a hopeful glance; he has experienced a sense of perfect peacefulness such as he had hitherto regarded as ideal; he has, through their mutual intercourse, united, as it were, all the discords of his young life into one harmonious whole; and lastly—that which ranks higher in his mind than all the other advantageous results combined—he has been able to instil into his companion a sense of joy and gladness.

He dwells on this latter point in rapture. That which a short time ago was merely a vague hope, seemingly impossible ever to be fulfilled, has actually come to pass. He has, by the exercise of his own will, succeeded in raising Miss Forsdyke from despondency to happiness. He, by himself, with no external assistance, has effected this, and as he contemplates the fact he is filled with joy. It is something of which he may be proud—an action capable of arousing envy in the mind of all mankind, for he has done that which all great hearts are striving to accomplish—

he has gladdened the life of a fellow-creature.

No cloud appears to dim the horizon of his happiness, unless it be the fear lest his intercourse with Miss Forsdyke may be discovered. But, as the days fly past without anything untoward occurring to mar the harmony of their clandestine intimacy, a feeling of false security comes over him, and the fear of discovery gradually fades away. But he never forgets to be otherwise than cautious in his speech and action. He is always on his guard, and when conversation approaches dangerous ground he weighs carefully every word before he speaks. He is also very careful not to excite suspicion by being seen too often leaving Banbury's in the direction of the wood; and to avoid this he varies his route, sometimes making long detours, and approaching the wood from the opposite direction. In fact, reader, you are quite right in thinking that Frank Grandby's honest character was becoming somewhat sullied by a practice of deceit.

Miss Forsdyke, too, acts with much precaution, though she has not much oppor-

tunity of involuntarily betraying herself, for she is immured throughout the day in her rooms, in close attendance on her aunt, whose nerves still continue in such a state as to prevent her from leaving the sofa. Except during those two afternoon hours in the wood, Grandby never sees her for a moment. Her hard fate creates general compassion throughout the hotel, and Mrs. Lamb once kindly offers to relieve her occasionally in her nursing duties. But she is met with a polite but firm refusal. She could never allow anyone but herself, Miss Forsdyke says, to attend on her suffering aunt. Instead of it being a hardship to her, it is a labour of love—which statement, it is needless to say, is a direct untruth on the part of the unfathomable Diana. But the pathetic idea of her passive devotion to her aunt raises her considerably in the opinion of the sympathising inmates of the hotel.

Since that memorable night when the ladies of the hotel gave way to such bombastic utterances, no reference has been made to the subject of Mrs. Stockton. There appears to be a tacit understanding amongst them that, the less there is said

upon the matter, the less their dignity will suffer. All painfully conscious of having cut very sorry figures on that particular evening, they wisely ignore the subject. Mrs. Lamb especially feels shame-faced. It is true that she braved it out to the last, resolutely holding her position till all her adherents had deserted her—but then it is likewise true that her bravado cost her very dear. It is impossible for the ladies, or their husbands either, to forget those hysterical shrieks, which suddenly roused the whole hotel at midnight, and continued through the small hours of the morning. Mrs. Lamb is quite aware that her lamentable collapse on that occasion was anything but heroic, and she deems it advisable under the circumstances to drop, for a time at least, the dangerous *rôle* of agitator.

To the relief of everybody, Mrs. Stockton has not yet reappeared at meals. For the greater portion of the day, she is locked in the privacy of her rooms, and it is needless to say that no one attempts to disturb her. The ladies *en masse* have conceived such a wholesome dread of her that they none of them feel any inclination to voluntarily

bring themselves into contact with her unwieldy person. How she occupies herself during the whole day in her own room remains a mystery unsolved, but, from the vollies of abuse which she is heard throwing at her trembling servants, it is generally presumed that she is not engaged in any pacific undertaking.

Sometimes she is seen, with a heavy scowl upon her unpleasant face, prowling about the passages, muttering savagely to herself, and her appearance is always the signal for a hasty closing of all the doors upon the corridor. That she is still in ignorance of her husband's whereabouts, there is no doubt, for a short note has been received from him by Major Lamb, written in a most unhusbandly jubilant strain, in which he requests him to 'keep it dark,' as long as he possibly can. And the fact of Major Lamb acceding to his request reflected great credit on the unselfishness of his character, for there is little doubt that, had he but confessed the secret to Mrs. Stockton, the hotel would have been rid of her presence instanter. Certainly, within twenty-four hours, she would have

been in hot pursuit of her recalcitrant spouse.

Grandby pursues his inquiries concerning Miss Rigby, and what he hears of her from various sources tends to make him very anxious concerning the future welfare of his friend. There seems to be no doubt that 'the bewitching Emily' is a very lax young person. She seems to enjoy a reputation of the most equivocal description. It appears that she has a partiality for *doubles-entendres* of an unmistakably high flavour, and some of her wittiest *bon-mots*, which are repeated to him by some of her most ardent admirers, fail to amuse him, as they otherwise might have done had she not been his bosom friend's affianced wife. In fact, what he hears of her fills him with such a grave sense of uneasiness that he cannot bring himself to pay his respects to her in person. He has his friend's happiness so much at heart, that he prefers to live in a state of anxious uncertainty rather than to have his worst suspicions rudely confirmed.

Grafton, also, in writing to him puts all doubt at rest as to the personality of his

betrothed. His letter is couched in a laughing strain, every word of which discloses plainly the boisterous spirits of the writer. In a postscript he writes as follows:

'How you discovered the name of my *fiancée*, my dear Frank, I cannot understand! You are much too-sharp for me, old boy! I am deeply obliged to you for your hint regarding Miss R.'s extravagance in dress. I have noticed the fact myself, not without misgivings. But I do not doubt that the married state will have a sobering effect upon her character. Mind you respect my secret!'

The question of leave is not yet settled definitely, but he states that he hopes in his next letter to be able to give some decided news upon the matter.

To Grandby's great delight, Miss Forsdyke evinces the highest interest in Grafton's approaching marriage. She reads the letter with an amused smile upon her charming face, and returns it with the remark that Mr. Grafton seems very happy. At the same time, she admits that in her own opinion she considers that he is embarking on a very risky enterprise. In

marrying solely on his pay, he is certainly sacrificing prudence to inclination. What is to become of his widow, in the event of his early death? she asks. How is she to live?

Grandby fully concurs with her that the widow's prospects would be pitiable indeed; but he reminds her that there is no immediate cause for the contemplation of such a disastrous contingency, as his friend is lucky enough to be the possessor of a magnificent physique. But Miss Forsdyke will not yield the point. Life and death are such huge uncertainties, she says, that no one ought to count upon twenty-four hours beyond the present moment. Whatever may be the strength of Mr. Grafton's physique, still he is mortal, and as such he is liable to die at any moment; and consequently the girl who married him would be ever haunted by the fear lest she might be thrown upon the world in a state of destitution. She is not of a mercenary disposition, Miss Forsdyke adds, but she considers that it is the duty of every girl before marrying, both to herself, to her admirer, and the world at large, to calculate well beforehand the question

of ways and means, to which expression of opinion Grandby fully agrees.

In Miss Forsdyke, he has found all the attributes essential to the foundation of a perfect friendship. Loving, sympathetic, trusting, with a disposition charming in its simple, confiding innocence, she possesses a mind capable of tendering him the most sound advice, as he has discovered on more than one occasion. He recognises that beneath that soft and pleasant manner there is a fund of resolute determination, and the knowledge pleases him, for, sadly conscious of the irresolution of his own character, he looks to her for assistance in the many petty trials of life. For, in contemplating their friendship, he never regards it as the intimacy of a week, a month, a year—but as the mutual attachment of a life-time.

All of this is very delightful to Frank Grandby. Under her influence, a new sense of happiness falls across his life, and makes of him a different man, rousing him effectually from the state of apathy which had formerly characterised his existence. And he is very, very grateful to her for the change which she has wrought in him,

and he tries to repay her by an ever-increasing display of tenderness.

He is amazed to think that a friendship such as he has formed would be generally condemned by the social world, and he attempts to analyse the line of argument adopted by the world at large, in order to arrive at their own conclusion. Do they think it *wrong?* he asks himself, in much perplexity. Is it possible that their minds are incapable of grasping the idea of a true, platonic friendship? Is it their opinion that man and woman are so debased that an intimacy of such a character must of necessity degenerate, and lead to evil consequences?

He can hardly bring himself to believe that this is their line of argument. Surely mankind must have a higher opinion of its own morality than to assert that an intellectual, sympathetic friendship betwixt man and woman is impossible! Why—the idea is simply monstrous! If they maintain the non-existence of other love than that of physical, then there is no such thing as *love*—the world is ruled by *lust!* Has not he himself proved absolutely to his own complete satisfaction that not only

is a platonic friendship possible, but that also it presents no difficulties whatever either in its creation or in its subsequent guidance?

A sense of modesty prevents him from arrogating to himself a discernment superior to that of the whole of the rest of mankind, but in no other way can he account for the fact that his opinion on this subject is so diametrically opposed to that of the remaining portion of humanity. Those who argue against it have evidently never tried it. He, in the face of their combined opinion, *has* made the experiment, and he has found it to answer admirably. Why, then, should he reject his own experience, and accept as truth the speculative utterances of unpractical theorists? Such a line of action would be as absurd as it was cowardly. To voluntarily yield his own rooted impressions to the opinions of others would be to deliberately admit to possessing no confidence whatever in his own intelligence.

But—*par parenthèse* it may be remarked—Grandby, in thus demonstrating to himself the practicability of his cherished scheme, entirely forgot to take into account

one highly important point—the effects of change-producing Time!

So the days fly past, and under the influence of the bracing climate Grandby fully regains his health and strength. He falls gradually into a certain routine, which varies but slightly day by day. Rising at eight, he takes a short stroll before breakfast, and then after the completion of that pleasant meal, he takes advantage of Loftus' kindness, and proceeds at a good brisk trot round about the Doonga Hill, riding for pure love of the invigorating exercise, and caring nothing as to what particular road he takes. It matters not in which direction he goes, as far as the beauties of scenery are concerned! Once Loftus accompanies him, but he does not offer to do so a second time. Grandby's rapid method of locomotion he does not find at all agreeable to his tastes. According to his own account, he was so terribly fatigued by the unusual exertion to which he had been subjected, that on his arrival home he fell off his pony into his servant's arms in a state of semi-insensibility, from which they could not arouse him until a glass of raw spirits had

been poured down his throat; after which, he said, he became a little better. But, still feeling a little weak, he finished off a second glass, and—'would you believe it, 'pon honour'—he actually fell down insensible again, at which Grandby smiles, remarking that he sees nothing whatever surprising in the circumstance.

Grandby spends the two hours after lunch in reading or writing letters. He is not a brilliant hand at the epistolary art, it must be confessed, but in spite of this his correspondence is by no means a limited one; there is such a ring of genuine honesty in his somewhat crude productions that they are far more acceptable to the recipient than anything in the way of polished writing (at least, so the author thinks). Then from four to six he is seated in the wood beside his sister-friend—and this is to him the pleasantest portion of the day. He has discovered in Miss Forsdyke a fund of laughing humour which has taken him completely by surprise.

In the last week her whole nature has transformed. From a sad, despondent girl she has changed into a being full of life and spirits, disclosing thereby a phase of

character hitherto totally unexpected. He views this marked change with a sense of great gladness, and he enters heart and soul into her lively sallies, thoroughly enjoying her quaint pleasantries and merry bursts of wit. At times the solemn old wood resounds with peals of laughter. He never suspects for one moment that her former depression of spirits had been affected for a purpose—namely, to attract him to her side through the force of a strong compassion—he merely notes the change in her disposition with a sense of ineffable content, feeling sure that it is due solely to the beneficial effects of the friendship which they have formed.

In the evening, after dinner, he sometimes visits Mrs. Lamb, and spends a quiet hour in her foolish society, listening placidly to the inane wanderings of her poor, silly tongue; sometimes, also, he strolls down to the club, and passes a pleasant evening with Loftus, doing his very best to induce his friend to take a more cheerful view of life. But he more often fails than succeeds in this respect. As a rule, the club-dictator firmly refuses to be convinced that everything is not in-

expressibly hollow in this third-rate planet. It is only when he has got outside a certain number of whisky-pegs that he partially rouses himself, and admits that there may be some truth after all in what Grandby says.

But, whatever slight variations may occur in the routine of Grandby's daily life, the influence of Miss Forsdyke's personality never deserts him for a moment. The first thought which arises in his mind on awakening in the morning is the prospect of their meeting in the afternoon, and the impressions which her laughing little form has made upon him during the day he carries with him into the fairy land of dreams. Day and night, asleep or awake, he is ever conscious of her existence, until he finally comes to regard her as an integral factor of himself, and he wonders in his heart how it was possible for him ever to have experienced happiness previous to the making of her acquaintance.

CHAPTER X.

DIANA BECOMES AGITATED.

A SOFT breeze is floating through the wood, carrying with it the fragrant scents of deodar and pine. There is a slight touch of russet brown resting on the surface of the sea of fern, intimating that the sunshine of the year is on the wane, for September has already put in its appearance, and all Nature shows an inclination to don a raiment of a more sober hue. But the air is still very soft and fresh, there being as yet no sign of the appearance of those biting frost-winds which later on in the year sweep with relentless fury across the Himalayas, presaging a heavy fall of snow.

The days are beginning to visibly shorten, and often, as the dusk descends, the hills

are wrapped in mountain mist, which effectually puts an end to all outdoor amusements. On account of the deepening twilight, Grandby has arranged with Miss Forsdyke to meet a quarter-of-an-hour earlier than has been their custom hitherto, but, in spite of their arriving earlier, they seldom separate sooner than they did before. They are so thoroughly wrapped up in each other's society that they do not mind having to wend their way homewards in the dark, if by so doing they can obtain a few minutes' extra conversation.

On this particular afternoon Miss Forsdyke has shown herself in exceptionally high spirits. She has been amusing Grandby with a description of her aunt's peculiarities, and she has retailed them in such a droll manner, and with such perfect mimicry, that he has been laughing himself to tears.

They are a very merry couple, sitting there together under the outspread branches of the grand old oak, and more than once the close wood rings with peals of laughter, which make them look rather anxiously about them, as they suddenly remember their position.

Then there is a pause. Miss Forsdyke has exhausted her amusing *repertoire* of anecdote, and they sit looking into each other's faces, with a smile of perfect sympathy on their lips.

Diana is looking ravishingly lovely. She has removed her hat, and her red-gold hair is quivering lightly in the breeze. A flush of colour illumines her magnificent complexion, and there is a look of happy contentment imprinted on her *mignonne* little face, which gives to it an expression of the most radiant beauty. He is looking at her out of his soft dark eyes with a glance of admiration, which he takes no trouble to conceal. Why should he attempt to conceal his admiration for his sister?

Suddenly she breaks the silence. Leaning forward, she peers curiously up into his face.

'Frank,' she says, 'the colour of your eyes is a total mystery to me. Sometimes they assume an unfathomable grey appearance, sometimes they are distinctly blue, and now they really seem to be approaching violet. You will have to excuse my familiarity, but I am resolved to ascertain now once for all their true colour.'

'I really don't know the exact colour of my eyes—I have never thought of looking,' he says, smiling, with a slight flush of colour. 'But, from your description, they must be peculiarly eccentric organs. I had no idea that they were capable of undergoing such vagaries as you describe.'

'Now, don't try to frighten me with your long words,' she says, with a captivating *moue*. 'And let me tell you, Mr. Frank, that it is very rude of you to cast doubt on the statement of a lady.'

'Pray don't think I doubt you,' he answers, with a smile. 'I am willing to accept as Gospel truth anything you like to affirm. Perhaps, if you continue your investigations, you may find my eyes in certain lights become pea-green. You have only to tell me the fact for me to believe it.'

'Now, I won't be treated in this shameful manner,' she exclaims, in mock-indignation. 'Your satire is really too-pointed to be pleasant. Pea-green, indeed! Let me look immediately, sir, and settle the question definitely once for all!'

She leans forward, and tries to penetrate the mystery.

'How dare you, sir!' she exclaims, indignantly. 'Open your eyes at once! Do you hear me? If you don't instantly obey me, I shall take advantage of the opportunity to gain a pair of gloves. Ah! I thought that that dreadful threat would bring you to your senses! Now let me see—this way, please—' she takes his face between her hands, and turns it to the light. 'Well, I declare—they are a perfect violet! What a priceless possession to be sure! Frank! Your impudence astounds me!'

This last remark arises from a sudden movement on the part of Grandby. Seeing her charming little face in such close proximity to his own, he cannot resist the impulse to bend forward and press his lips upon her cheek. There is nothing reprehensible in the action! Why should he not kiss his sister, if he likes?

She hastily draws herself away.

'You are incorrigible!' she says, with a vivid flush upon her cheek. 'How dare you take such liberties? Brothers and sisters only kiss, when they first meet in the morning, and when they say good-night.'

'That's all you know about the matter!'

he maintains, stoutly. 'Some brothers kiss after breakfast, and before lunch, and then again after lunch . . .'

'And at five o'clock tea, and before and after dinner, and then again before going to bed,' she interrupts, with a merry laugh. 'I quite understand you—you need not attempt to explain further. But they must certainly be very exemplary brothers to be so demonstrative as that.'

'Of course they are!' he exclaims, laughing in return. 'It is impossible to be too demonstrative in private.'

'Then kindly remember, for the future, that we are in public—sitting in the middle of an open wood,' she says, with mock-severity. 'It is very vulgar to make a public exhibition of one's feelings. Follow my example, and check your sudden impulses to be demonstrative. I for my part never dream of such a thing.'

'Oh! come—Diana! How about your threat to win a pair of gloves?'

'Well, yes—that was an exception!' she answers, smiling saucily. 'But you must admit that I was put to terrible temptation. *You* have no such excuse. If *I* possessed an olive skin, with exquisitely

moulded features, and were to close a pair of matchless violet eyes, I could quite understand your yielding to your feelings. But, as the matter stands, there is no reason whatever why you should not have controlled yourself.'

'Your arguments are narrow-minded,' he rejoins, quietly. 'You see the question merely from your own point of view. You appear to forget that different people have different tastes. The figure which you describe would have no charm for me whatever. My ideal of beauty is a little laughing face, crowned with a coronet of bronze-gold hair, with a complexion of dazzling fairness, illumined by two large speaking eyes, and a ruby mouth, curved like a cupid's bow.'

'Oh! I give in—I give in,' she cries, laughing heartily. 'You are more than a match for me. When you dash off into poetry in that alarming manner, it is time for me to retire. You should really have more sense, though, Frank, than to praise a girl so pointedly to her face!'

But Grandby utterly refuses to see the force of her protest. Why should he not praise his sister, if he wishes to?

For a moment or two there is a silence. Then, with a sudden look of recollection, he puts his hand into his pocket, and draws out a letter.

'How could I be so forgetful?' he says, 'I have heard to-day from George—such good news! He has got his leave, and he will be here in another day or two.'

'Got his leave!' she repeats, mechanically, a sudden pallor settling on her face. 'Oh! it can't be true!'

'But it is true!' he answers, with a happy laugh, without perceiving her anxiety. 'I heard from him this morning. Here is his letter. Would you like to read it?'

Without a word she takes it from his hand and reads it.

It is very short.

'DEAR FRANK,

'Just one word. I have got my leave. There are six weeks left of the leave-season, and my colonel has kindly given me the choice as to which half I shall take. I need not tell you that I shall choose the first three weeks. The tenth of September is only seven days off, and I mean to be punctual to the day. So expect me in

a day or two, and believe me, yours affectionately, 'GEORGE GRAFTON.'

'It is very sudden,' she murmurs, returning him the letter.

'Sudden!' he repeats, in surprise. 'Why—I have been expecting him this last fortnight. What is the matter with you, Diana? You are looking quite sad. I really believe that you are not pleased that George is coming.'

'What nonsense, Frank!' she says, with a nervous little laugh. 'How can you be so silly? Of course I am pleased, but—but'

'But what?'

'But—but it is really very sudden!' she says, faintly. 'I never expected that he would come so soon.'

'Diana, what *can* you mean?' he says, in accents of surprise. 'I thought that you would be so glad to hear that George was coming.'

'Of course I am glad,' she answers, steadying her voice with an effort. 'How can you be so silly as to imagine otherwise? It will be very nice for you to have your friend. But—but I am afraid'

He takes her hand in his and gently strokes it.

'What is it, Diana?' he says, softly. 'Are you afraid that his arrival may have an effect upon our friendship? You cannot be so foolish as to imagine that?'

'But I am—I am!' she cries, with agitation. 'Your friend will step between us—his arrival will crush our friendship—it *must* do so—I am certain of the fact. You will forget me and forsake me.'

'You must not be so foolish,' he says, in a soothing voice. 'You forget my friend's position. He will be so occupied with Miss Rigby that he will never trouble us. I doubt if I shall ever be able to drag him here at all—his time will be much too precious.'

'Ah! Frank, you do not understand,' she cries, in tones of pathetic sadness. 'I could not bear to lose you now—you are much too dear to me. Promise me, Frank, that, whatever happens, you will not despise me.'

Tears are glistening in her eyes, and he sees, from the imploring glance she casts upon him, how deeply moved she is. He kisses her gently on the forehead.

'My dear little Diana,' he whispers,

passing his arm around her, 'you are alarming yourself unnecessarily. Believe me, when I tell you, that George's arrival will have no influence whatever on the affection which I bear you. He is such a good, grand, noble fellow that'

'Who is that?'

With a sudden cry she jumps to her feet and gazes at the approaching figure of a man lounging carelessly along the narrow pathway running up the hill. A cigar is in his mouth, and his eyes are directed on the ground, and as he walks along he amuses himself with idly knocking off the heads of the coloured balsam with his stick. In a moment they have recognised him as Loftus, and they both remain in perfect silence with their eyes fixed upon him in a strange fascination.

Will he glance their way and see them? They dare not attempt to move behind the tree for fear of attracting his attention, and so, with their hearts in their mouths, they watch him slowly pursuing his way. The path runs at a distance of about three hundred yards from where they have been seated, and there is the chance that in the growing dusk he may pass them without

perceiving them. Apparently lost in thought, he does not withdraw his eyes from off the ground, and in another moment he has passed them and has disappeared without having glanced in their direction.

'What an escape!' says Grandby, with a long-drawn sigh of relief.

'I must be going, Frank,' she cries, hurriedly; 'it—it is getting very cold. Good-bye, my dear old boy, and may God bless you!'

She pulls his face down towards her, and kisses him passionately on the lips, and then, with a smothered cry, she turns away and leaves him, lost in wonder at her peculiar agitation.

CHAPTER XI.

MRS. STOCKTON'S MANŒUVRES.

'DIANA!' cries the sharp, petulant voice of Mrs. Renfrew from the inner room, 'can you not keep quiet for a moment? What are you doing pacing about the room?'

With an effort Miss Forsdyke controls herself, and manages to answer calmly.

'I beg your pardon, aunt,' she says, humbly; 'I feel very restless this evening, and I find a difficulty in keeping still.'

'I wish you would be more considerate for my nerves,' is the irritable rejoinder. 'You were out for full two hours this afternoon, and there is no reason whatever for you to have the fidgets.'

Miss Forsdyke makes no reply. She is standing in the middle of the room, wearing a look of intense misery on her face,

with her hand pressed against her forehead. She is barely conscious that her aunt is speaking, so engrossed is she with the turbulent workings of her own thoughts. A terrible struggle is raging within her brain. What is she to do? Shall she, when there is yet time, seize the proffered hand, and escape the awful danger, or shall she risk her very life by plunging into the depth of treacherous waters after the pearl she covets?

'I cannot give him up,' she whispers, despairingly. 'I love him—ah, I love him! He is everything in life to me, and it would kill me to give him up.'

Still she stands in the centre of the room, with her hands raised to her head in an attitude of despair. The larger hand of the little timepiece on the mantelpiece creeps slowly round, and then the quarter strikes, and then the hour—nine little silvery chimes—and still she never moves. The question before her is one of such gigantic magnitude that her senses seem to be crushed by its very weight. She cannot think coherently; not for two minutes consecutively can she carry on the same train of thought. And ever

there is ringing in her ears the one monotonous refrain—'I love him—I love him —I love him!'

A look of anguish overcomes her face, and she presses the palms of her hands against her eyes with a frenzied motion, swaying her body backwards and forwards in her misery.

What shall she do? How shall she decide? She knows that the answer to the question will materially affect her whole future life. Shall she obey the promptings of duty, and take the man whom she has promised to love in spite of his poverty, or shall she follow the mad inclinations of her heart, and wilfully choose the path leading to uncertainty, and perhaps dishonour?

'What will become of me?' she whispers, fiercely. 'Why was I so mad as to bind myself to a man I did not like? Why did I not have patience, and bide my time? Where was my courage when I so weakly yielded to his passion? Ah! I was mad —I was mad—I was haunted by the fear lest that fatal blot upon my past should leak out and ruin me, and I was resolved to save myself by marrying a man the

world respected, and I accepted him, secretly disliking him, conditionally—yes, conditionally. Even then, in that moment when all my senses seemed paralysed with a senseless fear, my repugnance to him overcame all other feeling, and I refused to bind myself at once—I gave myself six months, on the off-chance of doing better. But what chance have I—miserable wretch that I am, with this vague slur overhanging me, only requiring a single spark to set the whole terrible truth ablaze? And now—and now—what horrible complications are surrounding me? His best friend—his more than brother! Ah! I love him—I love him—I cannot yield him up! But what am I to do? Dare I repudiate this engagement on the chance of his ultimately learning to love me? Have I the power to make him do so? And would he marry me, knowing how I had treated his beloved friend? Dare I wilfully spurn this certainty of a future home on this vague hope? I am crushed, racked with doubt—my brain is reeling beneath this fearful pressure! What am I to do? Ah! God, if you do exist—I doubt it—look down on me and guide me!'

She falls back, shuddering, into a chair, and covers her face with her hands.

'Fool that I was,' she murmurs, hoarsely, 'knowing the fatal weakness of my passionate nature, how was I so mad as to have entered on this connection with Frank Grandby? Could I not have foreseen the inevitable result? Was it likely that my warm, impulsive temperament would remain proof against that god-like face? Ah, God—I love him—and I have loved him from the very first moment I set my eyes upon him. And he will love me—I know he will in time—I see it in his eyes—this flimsy pretence of platonic affection will crumble up like a spider's web, and he will learn the truth! And *must* I give him up to marry one I now detest? No, no—it is impossible, it would be my death.'

She rises and hurriedly walks to the table, and, without giving herself a moment for further thought, she hastily scribbles off a letter.

'I am mad!' she hisses between her teeth, and her face is blanched to a deadly white, 'stark, staring mad! But I cannot help myself—I will gain another respite, and see what I can do, for I love him

fiercely—madly—passionately—and I cannot—*will* not give him up !'

Her lips contract, and a look of resolute determination settles on her face. She places the letter in an envelope and addresses it, and then she rises and leaves the room, running along the corridor and down the stairs, not daring to pause for fear of repenting of her resolve. The letter-box is placed outside the dining-room, and she hastily proceeds towards it, and, after looking furtively around her, drops the letter in. Then, without waiting a moment, she hurries back to her room. It is done—the die is cast—that vital question has been answered, and she has with her own hand marked out for better or worse her future path in life !

Now it happens that, on this particular evening, Mrs. Stockton—to borrow from Loftus's forcible phraseology—' has been on the rampage.' As has been her custom of late, she has been roaming restlessly about the corridors as though she had a suspicion that she might possibly find her faithless spouse lying concealed in some dark corner. Muttering vain maledictions against the human race *in toto* for the last

half-hour, she has been pacing in and out of the passages, leaving and re-entering her room, without aim or reason.

These perambulations on her part were regarded by the residents in the hotel in the light of a safety-valve, which prevented her from blowing to pieces from excess of suppressed indignation—and certainly the pressure on her brain had been very high of late—so, consequently, they made no complaint, though it must be confessed that her sudden appearances at unexpected moments were often startling enough to cause much annoyance. But the inmates of the hotel had learned wisdom, and they made no attempt to have the nuisance removed; they calmly bore it, and all avoided her.

Mrs. Stockton's door opened on to the head of the staircase. As she re-enters the room for the sixth time in the last fifteen minutes, the noise of a door opening down the corridor strikes upon her watchful ear. In another moment a light figure flies past her open door and runs quickly down the stairs.

In an instant Mrs. Stockton is outside her room. Prompted either by mere curi-

osity, or perhaps by some vague suspicion, she cautiously peers over the bannisters down into the hall below, and there she sees Miss Forsdyke, with a furtive glance around her, drop a letter into the hotel letter-box. To use an appropriate but vulgar expression, the old lady *smells a rat.* The half-scared look on Miss Forsdyke's face has not escaped her vigilant eye, nor has the young lady's apprehensive glance around her prior to posting the letter passed unobserved. What can it mean? Why should there be cause to make a mystery out of such a simple action?

She hastily re-enters her room, and half closes the door, and the next moment Miss Forsdyke passes and hurries down the corridor.

Mrs. Stockton's curiosity is excited. She feels convinced that there is something to be discovered in the matter which would repay investigation. Young ladies, as a rule, she sagely argues, do not post their letters in a hurried, surreptitious way, if there be nothing to be concealed.

The memory of her degradation in Mrs. Renfrew's room has never left her. Day and night it has rankled in her distorted

mind, causing her to conceive a deadly hatred against that lady and her niece. Not even the disappearance of her husband has been able to make her forget the circumstance, or to stifle her craving desire to be revenged. And now, as she stands in her room pondering over Miss Forsdyke's mysterious behaviour, the thought rises within her that possibly in it may be discovered some clue which will point out to her some method of retaliation.

Having arrived at this conclusion Mrs. Stockton does not waste much time in convincing herself that it is her duty to investigate the case. By dint of long practice she has managed to impress upon her conscience that any advice it may have to offer, on any possible occasion, is quite superfluous, and will, consequently, be treated with contempt—so she suffers no inward sense of uneasiness as she leaves her room and cautiously descends the stairs. She has determined to see the address upon the envelope, hoping by so doing to gain some information of a damnatory nature.

The hall is quite deserted. From the interior of the dining-room, where the men

are enjoying the fragrant weed, there comes the sound of much discussion, broken by frequent peals of laughter which effectually deaden the sound of her heavy feet. As silently as it is possible for a woman of her unwieldy proportions, she crosses the hall and stands before the box. The key is on the top, affixed by a small, brass chain, and she eagerly seizes it and turns it in the lock.

Only one letter meets her view. She takes it in her hand, and reads the address.

George Grafton, Esq.,
Royal Engineers,
Sihayipur,
Punjab.

This is disappointing! What she has expected to see she does not know, but she is certainly disappointed at reading the plain, straightforward superscription before her. George Grafton!—Royal Engineers! There is not the slightest approach to anything hinting at a mystery here!

The argument which she now employs is of the very subtlest order of logic. First of all, in the form of a postulate, she affirms that, on account of Miss Forsdyke's pecu-

liar manner, there is a mystery connected with the letter. *But*—she continues—the mystery is not apparent on the envelope. What, then, is the self-evident deduction? Why—that the mystery can only be solved by inspecting the contents!

There is no refuting such solid argument as this! She stands there, wearing a look of triumph on her face at her remarkable sagacity, and then, as a natural consequence to her deduction, she calmly pockets the letter and proceeds to mount the stairs.

She enters her own room, closes the door, and turns the key in the lock. Moving in a methodical way, suggestive of her present occupation being by no means strange to her, she opens a cupboard and takes from it a small spirit-lamp, which she places on a table and proceeds to light. Her next proceeding is to walk to the washing-stand where she fills the tin saucepan with cold water, which she rests upon the little tripos raised above the flame. Then she sits down, with the letter in her hand, and calmly waits for the water to boil.

She rests her elbow on the table and supports her chin on her hand, and she gazes moodily at the spirit-flame, gloating

in anticipation over the treat before her. Ah! she will make the girl smart for having triumphed over her the week before!

The water begins to simmer, and then to boil, sending out a cloud of steam. She rises and holds the letter in the watery vapour. In a few minutes the envelope has become damp and moist, and, with little difficulty, she raises the adhesive flap, and opens it.

There is one sheet of paper inside; she takes it out and reads it.

'DEAR GEORGE,

'I feel compelled to break our solemn covenant. It has come to my knowledge that you purpose taking your leave in the next three weeks. I write to tell you that my aunt proposes to take me almost immediately for a trip into the Gullies, and thence over to Abbottabad. She thinks that a change of air and scene will benefit her health. On this account you had better alter your plans, and take the last three weeks instead of the first, which you can easily do, as I know that your Colonel has given you the choice. By that time, probably, we shall have returned.

Remember, that the writing of this letter in no way alters our former arrangement of silence till we meet.

'Believe me, yours very sincerely,

'D. F.'

A puzzled expression settles on her face. She reads the letter carefully through twice, but she can gain no clue as to its significance. Solemn covenant!—Former arrangement!—What can it all mean?

A feeling of baffled rage overcomes her, as she becomes conscious that she is no nearer the solution of the mystery than before. That there is a mystery she now feels assured—nothing could ever alter her opinion on that point—but, what it is, she cannot conceive. She contents herself, however, with the thought that she is in possession of certain peculiar information. She knows that Miss Forsdyke has entered into a solemn covenant of an unknown nature with one George Grafton of the Engineers, at present quartered at Sihayi-pur. This is *something*, at any rate, to work upon! She will not forget the fact—she will cherish it in the inmost recesses of her heart, and watch and wait till she can

discover something more definite on the subject—something, which she will be able to utilise against the girl she hates!

Then a sudden thought strikes her. The letter is important—urgent! The fact is evident, as Miss Forsdyke, in writing it, has been compelled against her will to break a solemn covenant. In a moment she has decided not to post the letter—she will retain it and then patiently await the consequence. As to what will be the result, she can form no idea. According to Miss Forsdyke's letter, she and her aunt —(curse them both!)—are on the point of starting for Abbottabad, and it is evident that the former is anxious that George Grafton should not arrive immediately. This is enough for Mrs. Stockton. She determines to arrange matters so that what Miss Forsdyke wishes to prevent shall actually come to pass, in the hopes that some clue to the real truth may possibly ensue.

As she is thus considering on her line of action, she becomes aware of the same hurried footsteps passing her door which she has heard some half-hour previously. In a moment she unlocks her door, opens

it, and cautiously issues out. She peers over the bannisters. It is again Miss Forsdyke, whom she sees. The girl casting uneasy glances around her, as though afraid of being perceived, is trying to unlock the letter-box with a nervous haste which considerably impedes her movements. Mrs. Stockton's curiosity is excited to fever-pitch. She leans her head right over to gain a better view. No power on earth could now convince her that there was not some deep mystery connected with the apparently simple letter.

Miss Forsdyke at last manages to turn the key. She opens the box and eagerly thrusts her hand inside. She draws it back with an exclamation of dismay.

'Ah! I am too-late!' she cries, with a gesture of despair, and after casting her eyes around her, as though in the hopes of alighting on the letter, she turns round, and slowly mounts the stairs.

Mrs. Stockton meets her on the landing. She appears as if she had but just issued from the room, and, with a gracious smile of unctuous affability, she bids 'good-evening' to Miss Forsdyke.

'Good-evening, Mrs. Stockton,' returns Miss Forsdyke, in a hesitating tone of voice. 'Could—could you kindly tell me what time the last post goes out?'

'At half-past nine,' replies Mrs. Stockton, with a pretence to thought, carefully noting the strange pallor on the young girl's face. 'I am afraid that you are too late to-night.'

'No—no—no, I do not want to send a letter,' says Miss Forsdyke, hurriedly. 'It was just the reverse. I posted one, and went to get it back, and I find that it is gone.'

'I trust that it was nothing important,' says Mrs. Stockton, suavely, inwardly radiant at the unexpected success of her manœuvre.

'Ah! but it was—it was! It is the hand of Fate!' cries Miss Forsdyke, with a tragic intonation, pressing her hand against her brow.

Mrs. Stockton is intensely interested.

'Ah! I am so sorry,' she begins, in sympathetic tones.

'Sorry—what for?' cries Miss Forsdyke, in a startled voice. 'What have I been saying? No—no—no, Mrs. Stockton—it

was nothing—nothing important—Good-night, I am deeply obliged to you;' and with a slight inclination of the head she turns away and disappears down the corridor.

Mrs. Stockton returns to her room, and walks straight to a cupboard, from which she removes a bottle of gum.

'I am utterly in the dark,' she mutters, carefully closing the envelope. 'What it all means, I can't conceive! But it is evident that it is to her disadvantage to send the letter. Consequently it is to my advantage to do so—and so it shall be sent!'

Saying which, she issues from her room, cautiously descends the stairs, and posts the mysterious letter in the box.

CHAPTER XII.

THE BANBURY GLOIRES-DE-DIJON.

Frank Grandby is intensely delighted at the prospect of seeing his dear old friend again. Nearly four years have passed since he last looked upon his honest, open countenance. Well can he remember when and how they parted.

It was on a wet, drizzly morning of a cold November day, and the place was Portsmouth dockyard. Grandby was then a boy of eighteen, who had yet to master the difficulties of a severe competitive examination, and his friend was three years older, a young officer in the Engineers, who had been suddenly ordered from Chatham to proceed to India. It was at the time when dark and gloomy clouds were arising on the horizon of our North-west

Frontier, and none could predict the magnitude of the storm which was fast approaching. There was, in consequence, a great demand for officers of all corps, and Grafton, through this lucky circumstance, escaped one year of the usual two years' course at Chatham.

'We shall meet soon again in India,' were the last words they said, as they wrung each other's hands, not without a suspicion of moisture in their eyes; and then Grandby obeyed the imperious order to go ashore, for the time of departure had arrived.

But four years had passed since that bleak, wintry day when Grandby stood upon the wharf, with his heart feeling very soft and tender, watching the great, white monster slowly steaming down past Spithead; and Fate had not decreed that they should come together. Four years, which, in prospective, seem a very eternity of time, but which, in retrospect, seem to have passed like an idle puff of wind!

But now, at last, the moment has arrived when they are to meet again. According to Grafton's letter, at the latest he

may be expected to arrive within three days.

In spite of their unchanged affection to one another, he knows that they cannot meet exactly as they parted. It is impossible for two people, separated for four whole years, to meet again without observing various little changes in one another. Grandby feels that he himself has changed—has greatly changed—since last he saw his friend. He has changed from boy to man, and with the change a grave reserve has usurped the place of his former boisterous spirits. He is well aware of this, and consequently he is fully prepared to find some corresponding change in Grafton's temperament. But what matters this external change, he argues to himself, when the heart remains unchanged?

The fact of Grafton's engagement still gives him grave anxiety, but it is now not on his own account, but on that of his friend, for it is impossible for him to conceal the fact that Miss Rigby is in no way suited for a good man's wife.

Overcoming his former scruples on this point, he asks Loftus to introduce him, and, the latter willingly consenting, together

they go and call upon her at her house, which, as far as he can judge, is straight below the wood of assignation. Of course he makes no reference to her engagement —he is not supposed to know anything of that secret—he merely talks on casual subjects, attempting to gain some insight into her real character. And what he sees confirms his very worst suspicions. He finds her fast, slangy, and a great authority on horse-flesh; and, the more he looks at her, the more he wonders in his heart how such a sensible man as Grafton could have chosen her for his wife.

Her behaviour, too, with Loftus suggests an intimacy of the closest familiarity. She calls him by his Christian name, often attaching, in a half-facetious way, some endearing epithet; she repeats to him an anecdote of a racy flavour concerning a certain lady's underclothing, at which he laughs uproariously. She asks him for a cigarette, which she promptly begins to smoke, leaning sideways in her chair, with her legs supported on the arm; in fact, in this brief half-hour, she commits a hundred improprieties, and Grandby rises, feeling disgusted and sick at heart. Walk-

ing home, Loftus chaffs him on his gloomy aspect.

'Lost your heart, old boy?' he says, jocosely. 'Isn't she just a perfect stunner?'

'She may be a perfect stunner, Loftus,' replies Grandby, with a trace of irritation in his tones, 'but that is hardly a quality desirable in a good man's wife.'

Loftus regards him for a moment, lost in amazement, and then his face assumes a look of indescribable amusement, and he brings his hand down heavily on Grandby's back.

'What!' he cries, with immense emphasis. 'Are you still harping on that strange idea? Well, blow me tight, you *are* a chap! The bewitching Emily is no more engaged to anyone, than you or I?'

But Grandby knows better; he has in his pocket at this very moment Grafton's letter, admitting to the fact. However, he does not attempt to argue the matter. Loftus' spirits, presumably from the effects of Miss Rigby's society, are for the moment so inordinately high that he feels that it would be worse than useless to try to convince him on the point.

He walks along in moody silence.

'I say, old chap,' says Loftus, suddenly. 'Have you been taking any walks lately for walking's sake? Split my windpipe, you're a deep 'un!'

'What do you mean?' says Grandby, flushing.

'Now, my dear boy,' says Loftus, impressively. 'Unless you promise me to keep your back hair on, I must really refuse to say another word.'

'You need not be afraid on that score,' returns Grandby, quietly. 'I shall not forget myself again!'

'Ah! I am glad to hear it,' answers Loftus, with a sigh of relief. 'It was very exciting at the time, I confess—but, as is usual with such excitements, a terrible reaction followed. For the next three days I was quite prostrate—could only lay on my back, and gasp—'pon honour, lungs refused to work at all. But you haven't answered my question yet, with regard to your delightful little constitutional promenades.'

'Yes—I have been walking a good deal lately, as you are so kind to enquire,' answers Grandby, coolly. 'But not so much, I must admit, since you were so

good as to put your steed at my disposal. That black mare of yours is a clinker—one of the grandest trotters'

'Ah! yes, I don't doubt it,' interposes Loftus, drily. 'But at this particular moment, I feel no desire to discuss the beauties of my animals. The black mare may be another Maud S. for all I know or care about the matter. I am a peculiar creature, with a mind capable of entertaining only one idea at once. And, as long as the idea is present, all the energies of my composition are concentrated on its development, making me profoundly indifferent to everything and everybody, extraneous to it. Now it happens that, at this moment, I am interested in nothing, which does not refer to—ahem—pedaneous perambulation. It has, in fact, for the time being, become the passion of my life.'

'I wonder, then, that you do not practise it more, considering the deep interest you appear to take in it,' says Grandby, calmly, well on his guard, conscious of the existence of some hidden meaning in his friend's speech.

'Well, yes, it is peculiar—in fact, it is damned peculiar,' says Loftus, pensively.

'The truth is, I thought I would enquire of you about the matter, before I took to it regularly myself. Walking is so foreign to me, that I feel convinced that my body would succumb to the unusual strain at first. To guard against this, I thought I would ask you about the walks round Doonga. You, who know them so well, might perhaps point out a path where I might find some comfortable resting-place. I should not like to be attacked with weakness in the middle of a public road—it would be distinctly damping to my newborn ardour.'

'I shall be most happy to give you information to the best of my ability,' says Grandby, cautiously. 'But I think you overrate my powers. There is a very pleasant road round Garam Point.'

'Ah! but I want something more secluded—some place where I can sit alone, and think, without fear of interruption—some grassy knoll, for instance, situated in the shades of some secluded wood. I thought that perhaps you might be able to help me in my quest.'

With an effort, Grandby stammers out some unintelligible reply.

'Oh! you cannot help me, you say?' says Loftus, quickly. 'What a pity, to be sure!'

'Well—I certainly know of a place, such as you describe,' says Grandby, flushing hotly. 'But I am afraid I cannot recommend it to you.'

'Then that dream is over,' says Loftus, with an air of composed resignation. 'I often thought myself that it would never come to anything. Doubts always assailed me on the subject. It was a very pretty, pastoral idea, sitting amidst a mass of fern, gloating rapturously over nature's beauties; but then, I could not conceal from myself that it was not without its attendant disadvantages—colds in the nose, and bronchial affections, you understand. Such great events often rise from little trifles. Who knows what misfortunes might accrue to either you or me from just sitting in a place such as I have described? It might be the means of *ruining* our lives. But here is my road—Ta, ta, old chap—I am sorry that you could not help me—we shall meet again to-morrow,' and, with an airy little wave of the hand, he turns away,

and lounges off in the direction of the club.

Grandby continues his way to Banbury's Hotel, thinking deeply. He fully understands the point of Loftus' remarks. His friend has diplomatically insinuated his knowledge of his clandestine intimacy with Miss Forsdyke, and in his concluding sentences he has hinted at a further warning on the subject. He must have seen them the day before, when he was strolling up the short cut from Miss Rigby's house, although at the time he had had the good taste not to show it.

The thought that his secret is known to Loftus does not cause him much perturbation of mind. It is annoying, certainly; but then he is fully assured Loftus is as true as gold, and will not allow it to go further. So confident is he on this point that he even experiences a sense of amusement as he recalls the very delicate method employed by his friend in confessing to the knowledge. It is quite evident to him that Loftus has learned wisdom from the quarrel of the other day, and has no wish for a second insight into his capacity for displaying temper.

The *Gloires-de-Dijon* are in full bloom. Grandby stands regarding them in a reflective mood. There is one small tree, detached from the rest, which particularly attracts his attention, on account of the marked superiority of its flowers. It is literally weighed down by a mass of lovely yellow crests.

He has never obtained the slightest inkling to the solution of the mystery of those gravestone wreaths. He has sounded the manager on the subject, but the answers that he has received have only mystified him the more. The manager confessed to the great pride that he took in the possession of the flowers. They were the only specimens to be found on the Doonga range, he said, and he made their growth his special care, and he was not ashamed to admit that he was very chary in allowing them to be plucked. He liked to see them flourishing beneath his walls; it gave the house a cheerful, not to say refined, appearance. Well, yes—the ladies of the hotel were privileged to pick them—but of course in moderation, but he could emphatically affirm that no human being in

Doonga outside the hotel could possibly be in possession of the flower.

It was evident then to Grandby that the unknown tender of his sister's grave was actually then within the hotel, or had been there within the last fortnight, but, as to whom it could possibly be, he could not make a guess. The fact of his ignorance on this point gave him no little annoyance; he felt that he could bow down and worship the unknown person, who still reverenced so touchingly the memory of his sister.

That afternoon he experiences a disappointment. Miss Forsdyke, for the first time since their intimacy began, fails to keep her appointment. He stands under the old oak, anxiously awaiting her appearance; but he waits and waits in vain, and at last he gives up all hope, and in a very injured spirit wends his way homeward through the mist, which has suddenly enveloped the whole hill.

He feels very sore at heart, and works himself up into the belief that he has been treated not only badly, but shamefully. He really had not imagined that Diana

could have been capable of such a shabby trick. To keep him waiting there for sixty minutes, and then not to put in an appearance after all! Her behaviour literally disgusts him. Considering what affection he has bestowed upon her, and what a good friend he has been to her for the last fortnight, he really thinks that he has a right to be treated with a little more consideration. If it was her intention to absent herself, why had she not informed him of the fact? No—much as he loves her, he can find no excuses for her low, mean, disgusting, childish, unsisterly breach of manners.

But his anger rapidly evaporates when, on arriving home, he catches sight of a little note lying loosely on the table. He eagerly seizes it and tears it open. The dreadful thought has just struck him that Diana may be very ill.

'My dear, dear Frank,' he reads, 'what will you think of me when you find me absent from the dear old oak? I could not really come. I have been afflicted all the day with a nervous headache, which has made me good-for-nothing. Racked with pain, I have been lying on my bed trying to conjure up your dear image

before my eyes. And it was not a difficult task to accomplish. I had only to close my eyes, and *think*, and then I saw you plainly, with your dear, laughing, violet eyes. I wish that I could have let you know before—but I could not, for I dare not trust a servant in the matter. It was only when the thick mist suddenly arose that I thought perhaps I might run up to your hut unperceived and try to throw it through the window. I hope I may succeed. Frank, dear brother, are you very angry with me? Ah, if you saw me now, you would forgive me. If you do not hear from me again, I shall be there to-morrow. In great pain I sign myself,

'Your loving sister, 'D.'

Angry! He raises the letter to his lips and passionately kisses it. Oh! how can he ever forgive himself for having entertained bitter thoughts against her, when at the time she was lying on a bed of pain? *Angry* with his little sister! Could he ever be angry with her, come what may?

Again and again he presses the letter to his lips.—Why should he not kiss his beloved sister's handwriting if he likes?

He is not conversationally inclined during dinner that night. Mrs. Lamb in vain tries to extract some pretty piece of flattery from his winning lips, but she fails most ignominiously. Her most coquettish speeches fall upon an inattentive ear, and the replies she receives are curt and monosyllabic, and sometimes of a totally irrelevant character. The truth is, his mind is engrossed with the thought of Miss Forsdyke's sufferings, and, as is the custom in such cases, he foolishly allows his imagination to carry him away, and he begins to picture her almost at the point of death.

Mrs. Lamb, extremely slow to take a hint, still persists. So accustomed is she to hear his pleasant voice at this hour of the day that she cannot stand this silence, so she continues in her feebly facetious strain, until he really begins to show marked signs of irritation.

'Ah!' she says, archly, 'I have guessed your secret! Mr. Grandby—you are in love!'

He turns round abruptly, and, to her great discomfiture, emits, with an emphasis totally unnecessary to the occasion, the one word—'Bosh!'

In the next moment he is apologising profusely for his rudeness. Will she forgive him? He has been suffering the whole evening from a very severe headache, and he is consequently nervous and excitable.

Mrs. Lamb implores him not to mention it. She has noticed that he has been looking pale and worried. Would he allow her to fetch him some sal-volatile after dinner? She once had a maiden aunt who suffered horribly from nervous headaches, and the only thing which had any effect on her was sal-volatile and lemonade. Or was it eau-de-Cologne? She really cannot remember for the moment. She is inclined to believe that it *was* lemonade—although perhaps it *might* have been warm vinegar!

'Take a brandy peg,' says the major, smiling contemptuously at the suggestions of his wife.

Grandby begs her not to concern herself about him. He is accustomed, he says, to slight headaches, and the best remedy he knows of is a breath of fresh air. He thinks, if she will kindly excuse him, that he will leave the table and go outside.

'Certainly,' she says, with sympathy. 'Oh! I am so sorry for you, Mr. Grandby. Are you sure that you are well enough to go alone—or shall I accompany you?'

What a hypocrite he feels! He politely declines the offer and leaves the room. Dear Diana! Sweet, suffering girl!

The mist has entirely disappeared, and the moon is shining full on the cold fresh earth. He walks down to the tennis-courts, musing over Diana's sudden illness, wondering to himself whether she has told him the whole truth. Perhaps, to spare his feelings, she may have concealed from him the serious nature of her illness! Poor little darling! Lying there in that sick-room, on a bed of pain!

A longing comes over him to look upon her room. Perhaps he may be able to gain some soothing information by gazing at her window. So he leaves the grass, and walks up on to the gravel-path encircling the hotel.

That is her window—the third one from the right! The blind is down and a lamp is shining from within. He stands gazing rapturously towards it. Why should he not look at his sister's window if he likes?

No shadow falls across the blind. For full ten minutes he stands in that position, looking upwards, hoping to see some sign of life. But nothing stirs within the room—which fact somewhat relieves his fierce anxiety. It shows, at any rate, that she is in no immediate danger.

The air is redolent of the fragrant scent of those famous *Gloires-de-Dijon*, which have caused him so much perplexity. He approaches them and buries his face deep into their midst, inhaling long draughts of sweet perfume.

Suddenly he pauses—takes a step forward—stops irresolutely—and then walks rapidly to the corner of the house, where he stands gazing incredulously at the little isolated tree which he had noticed that morning as possessing exceptionally lovely roses. As it now appears before him in the soft moonlight, it is completely destitute of flowers. It is stripped bare—every rose and every bud has been removed!

The flowers have been picked that afternoon between the hours of one and seven. Who has picked them, and for what purpose have they been picked?

He determines to set the doubt at rest.

If—as he suspects—he finds on the morrow two fresh wreaths lying in the cemetery, then it will become a moral certainty that the guardian of his sister's grave is actually living at the present moment in Banbury's Hotel—and, if such be the case, he determines not to rest until he has discovered her mysterious personality.

CHAPTER XIII.

GRANDBY BECOMES INDIGNANT.

Grandby is strangely agitated with regard to the mystery of the flowers. More than four years have elapsed since his sister died, and this careful tending of her grave points to the existence of some extraordinary reverence to her memory on the part of some unknown person.

To a character so keenly sensitive to sympathy and displays of kindness as is Grandby's, the fact of his being ignorant of the name of this devoted friend naturally causes much annoyance. He longs to shake her hand, to converse with her on their common sorrow, and to thank her warmly for her goodness. For in all his musings on the subject it never enters into his head that this unknown being is other than a

woman. The action is so essentially womanly that it would be impossible to entertain a contrary opinion. It is true that, at first, he had suspected Loftus, but, on further consideration, he has perceived that such an idea can have no foundation. Faithful as his friend has been to the memory of his sister, he is conscious that Loftus' disposition is not the one to allow him to display his feelings in such a pathetic, graceful way.

True to the resolve made over-night, the next morning, after breakfast, Grandby mounts the black mare, and proceeds at a brisk trot in the direction of the cemetery. He has sent on one of Loftus' *saises* before him, and he finds the man awaiting his arrival outside the gate. Dismounting, he walks quickly into the consecrated enclosure. Within his own mind he has no doubts as to the issue of his visit. He feels morally convinced that he will find what he expects.

And he is right in his conviction ! Lying upon the two broad, marble slabs are two wreaths of *Gloire-de-Dijon* roses, so freshly picked that they still retain their perfume. There are no signs of the former faded wreaths ; the fond hand which has brought

the fresh, sweet-smelling flowers has been careful to remove all traces of decay. He closely examines the ground around, and he fancies that he can discern the print of a little foot, but the turf is so hard and firm that he can distinguish nothing definite.

He lingers for a few moments, gazing regretfully at the stone which covers all that remains of his darling sister, and then, half reluctantly, he tears himself away and leaves the place. Mounting the mare he gives directions to the *sais* to follow him to the club, and in another moment he is trotting homeward. He has resolved to speak to Loftus again upon the subject—to ask him whether he cannot make some guess as to the personality of his unknown benefactress.

It is half-past eleven when he arrives at the club, so, concluding that in all probability Loftus has not as yet made a public appearance, he proceeds straight to his room—number eight, on the ground-floor. He finds him sitting in his arm-chair, arrayed in the same splendid dressing-gown costume which he has already had the privilege of seeing. A fire is burning in

the grate, and Loftus, with a cigar in his mouth and the inevitable long glass beside him, is crouching over the crackling logs.

'So glad to see you, old chap,' he says, as Grandby enters, flushed with healthy exercise. 'Kindly shut the door. Ah!—Thank you. Have you ever known such god-forsaken weather in your life? How I envy those lucky chaps down in the plains, basking in the sun!'

'Hullo! what's in the wind now?' cries Grandby, with a good-humoured laugh. 'Have you actually discovered a new cause for complaint? Your inventive faculty seems inexhaustible.'

Loftus shakes his head dismally from side to side.

'That's right—rail on!' he says. 'Crack your jokes at my expense, if it amuses you—and don't mind *my* sensitive feelings! It is ever the fate of those who suffer, to be despised and ridiculed.'

'But—old chap—I hope you are not ill,' says Grandby, with concern. 'I am really awfully sorry, if you are. But it didn't strike me that you were looking worse than usual.'

'Ah! it is fatal to judge from outward

appearances,' replies Loftus, with sententious melancholy. 'It is my misfortune to retain a healthy aspect, although I am suffering excruciating pain. Were my face a true reflection of my present state of health, I should now be as pale as a two days' corpse.'

'Oh! my dear old chap, I trust that it is not so bad as that,' says Grandby, with alarm. 'Come, rouse yourself and tell me what you feel! Have you seen a doctor? Where are you suffering pain?'

'Ah! you may well ask where!' says Loftus, gloomily. 'I only wish that I could tell you—but that is beyond my power.'

'But surely you can form some opinion on the matter? Is it in your head?'

'No—it is not in my head,' says Loftus, slowly, after thinking deeply for the moment.

'Then perhaps it is your liver?'

Loftus gravely presses his hand against his right side, and appears to listen, as though he expected to hear the workings of decay.

'No,' he says, with a sigh of relief, 'it is not my liver!'

'Is it gout?'

No, it is not gout—Loftus is convinced on that point, after a prolonged contemplation of his elegantly-embroidered slippers. Nor is it rheumatism, or stomach-ache, or choleraic spasms, or any other malady that Grandby can suggest.

'Then it must be conscience,' he says, with a happy thought.

But Loftus indignantly repudiates the idea. He is happy to say that he has never done an action of which he is ashamed. He is disagreeably surprised that Grandby can even hint at such a thing!

'No offence, old chap!' laughs Grandby, softly. 'I only mentioned it being at my wit's end for further suggestions. If you do not suffer in any of the places I have mentioned, there is only one place left where your pain can possibly be.'

'And where is that?'

'In your own imagination.'

'I am of half a mind to believe that you are right,' says Loftus, thoughtfully, raising his tumbler to his lips. 'But then it makes no difference to me, whether my pain is imaginary or real. If I *imagine*

that I suffer agonies, it is really just as painful as if I really suffered them. You must agree with me in that?'

'Yes—that is quite true,' laughs Grandby. 'But then why do you imagine anything so unpleasant. Wouldn't it be just as easy for you to imagine, now, that you are well again?'

'Ah—no,' says Loftus, sadly, 'that would be quite a different thing. Imagination, such as that, could only spring from a contented mind. *My* spirits are so low that I am not capable of imagining other than gloomy things. Oh! I am a cursed worm!'

'Then my advice to you is to leave imagination alone altogether. I will tell you what it is, old chap—you are by a long way too partial to that whisky bottle. If you don't take care, your miserable imagination will degenerate into hallucination, and from it is but a short cut to delirium tremens.'

Loftus places his tumbler suddenly on the table, and looks towards him with an expression of stupefied amazement; and then a flicker of a smile sports itself about the corner of his mouth, changing present-

ly into a decided grin, and terminating in a hearty burst of laughter.

'My dear boy,' he cries, 'as I have remarked before, you are a tonic for every malady under the sun. Why—I feel a better man already—yes—I declare—I feel my imagination taking a livelier turn. Another deliciously naive remark like that will cure me altogether. Hallucination! —Delirium tremens! Oh! great Jezebel! —you are an A 1 corker!'

'I am delighted to think that I possess the power to restore your shattered nerves —I am sure they want a pick-me-up,' says Grandby, smiling. 'But really, you know—I am in earnest about the whisky bottle. I don't think that you can comprehend'

'Oh, great Scott, you are too delicious! To think of your setting yourself up to preach to me on such a subject as that of alcohol! My dear boy, compared with mine, your knowledge on the subject is simply nil. Not comprehend, indeed—oh! that is *too* rich. Why, Grandby, you are a perfect child to me; I knew how to get tight like a gentleman before you ever donned a pair of breeks.'

Loftus is immensely amused, and, the more Grandby refers to the subject, the more he laughs, and so immoderately that the former is fain to desist, and to laugh in unison.

'You have cured me quite,' cries Loftus, brandishing the poker round his head, such is the exuberance of his new-born spirits. 'Imagination has totally deserted me, and I am myself again—ready to drink a cellar dry on the slightest provocation.'

When Loftus has managed to somewhat regain his gravity, Grandby opens the subject uppermost in his mind. He relates the incident of the disappearance of the *Gloires-de-Dijon* from the hotel garden the day before, and how he has verified his suspicions by going to the cemetery; he points out that it must of necessity be an inmate of the hotel to whom he is so much indebted, and he asks Loftus to search his memory afresh, and to try to give him some solution of the mystery.

But Loftus maintains that he is totally unable to throw any light whatever on the matter.

'I thought,' says Grandby, 'that you, who knew my sister so well, might prob-

ably have some knowledge of her former friends. Are you sure that there is no one now in the hotel who used to be her friend?'

'Quite sure,' answers Loftus, emphatically. 'I know the whole of the present Banbury lot—and a precious rubbishy lot they are, too—and I am quite certain that she was never intimate with any of them.'

'It is really very mysterious, then,' says Grandby, slowly. 'Whatever may be the motive, the fact remains that the wreaths are placed upon the graves.'

'Now you mention the fact,' says Loftus, reflectively, leaning back and puffing at his cigar, 'I *did* meet yesterday afternoon a young lady living at Banbury's somewhere in the direction of the cemetery. She was walking along the lower road, and, though she was some distance off, I am quite certain that I recognised her.'

'Who was that?' cries Grandby, eagerly.

'Well, I must confess that I have some compunction in mentioning the name,' remarks Loftus, calmly criticising the long white ash of his cigar, 'because it is more or less a forbidden subject between us. But, since you press the point, I will tell you. It was Miss Diana Forsdyke.'

'Diana Forsdyke!' cries Grandby, in amazement. 'My dear Loftus, you must be dreaming! About what time did you think you saw her?'

'About five o'clock in the afternoon.'

'Well, your eyes must have deceived you,' says Grandby, somewhat coldly. 'I happen to know that the young lady at the time you mention was confined to her room with a severe head-ache.'

'You don't mean it!' says Loftus, incredulously. 'Why, I tell you that I saw her walking in the distance down by the lower road.'

'But I do mean it,' answers Grandby, firmly. 'I not only affirm it, but I swear it, for I am sure of it.'

Loftus gives vent to a low whistle of astonishment.

'Well, I'm blessed!' he says. 'If it were not Miss Forsdyke, it must have been her double, and I can hardly believe that the world *can* contain two young ladies of such peculiar powers of fascination.'

There is a silence—the two men occupied with their own line of thought. Grandby is feeling intensely annoyed at what he considers an unwarrantable im-

putation cast by Loftus on the character of his sister-friend. He fully believes that the whole incident has been invented solely with the purpose of making him suspicious against the girl. Luckily, however, he has been in a position to utterly refute the fabrication. Had he not been so, really he might have been impressed by the mendacious statement. He is much hurt to think that his friend is unable to repress the insensate spite that he has conceived against Miss Forsdyke.

Suddenly he breaks the silence. He has resolved to make some explanation with regard to his intimacy with Miss Forsdyke, thinking that possibly Loftus may have formed a wrong impression of its character.

'Loftus,' he says, quietly, 'I think that you are aware that of late I have become very intimate with Miss Forsdyke. From what you said yesterday, I fancy that you are acquainted with our secret meetings. Is not this so?'

Loftus nods his head discreetly, too cautious to make reply before he comprehends exactly the true drift of the question.

'Yes, I knew you were,' continues Grandby, accepting his silence as an acquiescence.

'Then I think that it is my duty to offer you some explanation, not on my own account, but on that of Miss Forsdyke—for of course it is a question concerning a lady's honour.'

'Explain away,' says Loftus, regarding him curiously through a cloud of smoke, as he settles himself down comfortably into the depths of his low arm-chair. 'I am all attention.'

'I admit that the affair may possibly bear a suspicious aspect,' says Grandby, in a somewhat embarrassed way. 'You have seen me sitting with a young girl in the recesses of a wood, which is certainly a very unconventional proceeding; so therefore I feel that it is justifiable for you to form your own opinion on the matter. Probably you have formed a bad opinion?'

He pauses and gazes inquiringly into his friend's face, on which is to be seen a flicker of amusement.

'My dear boy, it is not for me to meddle in your affairs,' says Loftus, earnestly. 'I can assure you that I have not allowed myself to form any opinion whatever on the point in question, nor is it my intention to do so. I am not a saint myself,' he

adds, composedly, thereby plainly disclosing his real opinion on the matter.

'But it is my wish that you should form an opinion,' says Grandby, eagerly; 'and I want you to form the right opinion. It is for this reason that I wish to tell you the true facts of the case.'

'Very well,' says Loftus, 'if you wish it. But details of amours are usually most uninteresting to third parties.'

'I want you to understand,' says Grandby, without noticing the interruption, 'that there is no question of flirtation in the case at all.'

Loftus' face presents a perfect study. It bears an expression of blended incredulity and amusement as he sits gazing at his friend. His mouth is half opened, and his eyes are fixed stonily in front of him, his hand pausing irresolutely in mid-air, holding his smouldering cigar.

'I beg your pardon,' he says, faintly; 'I did not quite catch your last remark.'

'I want you to know,' says Grandby, with some excitement, 'that the intimacy I have formed with Miss Forsdyke is not one of vulgar intrigue or flirtation.'

'Then—then what the devil is it?' gasps Loftus, blankly.

'There is no question of love in the matter. It is nothing more nor less than a great platonic friendship.'

For a moment there is a dead pause, and then follows a stifled splutter of 'Oh, my God!' from Loftus, and he is leaning back shaking from top to toe with laughter.

'It is nothing to laugh at,' cries Grandby, indignantly. 'I mean exactly what I say—it is a great platonic friendship.'

'Oh, oh, oh!—hold me tight!' cries Loftus, pressing his sides, and wriggling about in his chair under the influence of his mirth. 'Oh! Grandby, stop, for God's sake! I—really—can't—stand it. You—my dear boy—you—will be—the death of me.'

Grandby views his contortions with a sense of great annoyance, not unmingled with contempt. What on earth is the fool laughing at?

'I tell you,' he says, raising his voice excitedly, 'that it is a great platonic——'

'Oh, stop—stop, for God's sake!' gasps

Loftus, imploringly, literally convulsed with laughter. 'I cannot stand it—I would if I could—but I really cannot. Oh, spank me crimson, I am dying!' and he rolls off his chair, and lies on the hearth-rug, laughing till the tears roll down his cheeks.

Grandby rises supremely indignant.

'I am not going to be made a fool of,' he says, walking majestically towards the door.

In a moment Loftus is by his side, clinging to his arm.

'Don't go, old chap—don't go!' he gasps, vainly striving to repress his laughter. 'Don't let's quarrel again—life's too short. I believe—I believe it—every word of it—crack my skull with a red-hot poker if I don't! What is it you call it? A great—platonic—friendship! Oh, my God! my God! if I am not a wicked sinner, you may blow out my brains with a pair of bellows!'

'I am not thinking of quarrelling again,' says Grandby, with the grandest air imaginable; 'but, at the same time, your society at this moment being far from pleasant, I will rid you of my presence. I wish you a good-morning;' and he walks

out, with his handsome nose well tilted in the air.

'It is a climax!' gasps Loftus. 'Drinking to quench one's thirst and walking for walking's sake are nowhere compared with this. Stars and snakes—my bones are breaking! A—great—platonic—friendship! What an idea! What a stupendous creation! What a magnificent brain! Oh! it is too terrible! Give me the whisky-bottle—or I shall die!'

CHAPTER XIV.

DIANA EXTRACTS A PROMISE.

GRANDBY'S indignation cools slowly. At half-past three that afternoon, as he saunters out of the hotel gardens with an affectation of indifference in the direction of the wood, there is still a trace of resentment in his heart towards his friend.

He feels that he has been treated very badly. Considering that he had been so good as to take no offence, when Loftus had basely concocted a vile fabrication against Miss Forsdyke's reputation, and considering also that the matter, which he was attempting to explain, was of a very *serious* character, he cannot but feel conscious that his friend has behaved to him in a most insulting and inexcusable manner. Instead of feeling grateful to him for hav-

ing ignored his mendacious assertion—which was probably regretted as soon as uttered—his friend had treated his remarks with overwhelming ridicule. He had literally rolled upon the carpet in convulsions!

To Grandby, this is very galling. He asks himself, what in the name of wonder can have caused his friend's collapse? Was it done purposely to annoy him, or was there really anything peculiarly humorous in his speech?

But this latter idea is too preposterous to be entertained for a single moment. He has merely made a statement of a serious character in a serious voice; he has merely explained that his friendship with Miss Forsdyke is based on purely platonic lines. How, possibly, could any human being discover anything humorous in such a plain, straightforward remark? The notion was absurd!

But then, if not, what is the only other alternative conceivable? To believe that Loftus' behaviour was actuated solely by a wish to annoy. But this is even more preposterous than the former theory. Loftus, he knows, is far too warm-hearted

and good-natured, ever to willingly lay himself out to purposely offend.

So having arrived thus far, as is usual with lengthy self-analysis, he finds himself no nearer the truth than when he started. Consequently his indignation does not appreciably decrease. If he could only discover some hidden cause for Loftus' mirth, he feels that he would not be so much incensed against him. It is the fact that he has been ridiculed, apparently for no reason whatever, which makes him angry.

So, thus thinking, he wends his way down the little path leading through the wood. He is conscious that it is his duty to again warn Miss Forsdyke of the ill-feeling that Loftus bears against her. This last exhibition of his friend's malice has impressed him not a little.

He finds Diana awaiting his arrival, and he is pained to see how ill she is looking. Her face is very pale, and there are dark rims encircling her lustrous eyes, which seem to point to recent bodily suffering of no mean order. She advances towards him with a feeble smile, and takes both his hands in hers.

'I have come to-day, Frank,' she says, looking half-sadly up into his face. 'Are you very angry with me for failing yesterday?'

He bends his face, and kisses her on the forehead. It is astonishing, even to himself, how fond he is of kissing his sister-friend. It only shows, he argues to himself, the depth of the brotherly love he bears her.

'Angry, Diana?' he says, affectionately. 'What a strange idea! I cannot tell you how anxious I have been about you. I was so miserable yesterday, thinking of your suffering, that I completely lost my appetite—and, during the dinner-hour, I was wandering outside your room, looking up at your window, in the hopes of gaining some definite news concerning you.'

'You silly boy!' she says, softly, with a trace of colour mantling her pale cheeks. 'How could you be so absurd? I was not dying.'

'No—but I frightened myself into all sorts of wild beliefs. Did you suffer much, Diana?'

She passes her hand wearily across her brow, and heaves a little sigh.

'It was terrible for a time,' she says,

as she seats herself upon the ground, he following her example. 'My brain seemed all on fire, and even your gentle image seemed powerless to soothe it. Even now I am not quite well. But have you heard again from Mr. Grafton?'

'No—he has not written again. But I do not expect to hear from him till I see him.'

'Then it is quite certain that he is coming?' she says, nervously plucking at the grass.

'Certain!—of course it is!' he says, in some surprise. 'He wrote on the third, saying he would appear in a few days. To-day is the seventh. I should say, at latest, that he would be here to-morrow.'

She gives another little sigh, and half averts her head. Little does he know what terrible anxieties are working in her brain!

'My dear little sister,' he says, softly, noticing her sorrowful appearance, 'I am afraid that you are still brooding over that idea. What can I say to convince you to the contrary? George is the dearest, grandest, noblest creature on this earth. To come between us two would be the very

last thing that he would do. His one idea in life is to make me happy, and, when he sees that my happiness is wrapped up in our friendship, he will do everything in his power to further it and foster it. Cannot you believe me when I tell it you?'

She looks towards him, and laughs half-hysterically.

'Ah!' she cries, 'you do not understand. He may be good and grand and noble, but yet his appearance will put a lasting end to our friendship. Mark my words, they will come true—I know it for a certainty.'

'This is really foolish, Diana,' he says, leaning towards her and taking her by the hand. 'You are weak and low-spirited in consequence of your illness. To-morrow all such gloomy thoughts will disappear.'

'Would that I could think so,' she says, with a quivering lip. 'But I know that I am right in my prediction.'

'But you are wrong, I can assure you,' he earnestly persists. 'How can you judge what he will do when you are entirely ignorant of his character? Why, you barely know him by sight, do you?'

'No,' she answers, faintly, a shiver running through her frame.

'Well,—I, on the contrary, know him better than myself,' he says, in reassuring tones. 'He is my *alter ego*. I know him so well that I can predict almost to a certainty how he would act on all occasions. When I tell him of our friendship, he will at first look a little grave, for in his heart, I know, he will not approve of the clandestine character of our intimacy. But when I explain to him how pure it is, how elevating, how essential to our happiness, how impossible it was on any other footing—then, I know, he will enter into it heart and soul, and do his best to promote our happiness.'

'But—but—supposing he were to think otherwise?' she murmurs, in a hesitating voice.

'It is impossible!' he cries, with energy.

'But—but—just supposing that he did, what would you do then?'

'Do then!—I should convince him to the contrary.'

'Yes, yes,' she says, nervously. 'But supposing that he would not be convinced.'

'It is impossible!' he cries.

'Ah!' she cries, despairingly. 'You *will* not understand. Supposing that *no-*

thing on earth will ever induce him to look with favour on our intimacy—what would you do then? Would you still continue to give me your love, or would you forsake me?'

'Diana, how can you ask such a question?' he says, reproachfully. 'No force on earth would be strong enough to tear me away from you now. I think of you day and night—you have grown an integral part of my very life.'

'Oh! that I could think so!' she murmurs, faintly; and then she suddenly throws herself before him, resting her head against his knee.

'Frank, Frank!' she cries, in tones of passionate entreaty, 'promise me—that nothing which your friend may say to you will ever make you hate me. Promise to always love me, and be my friend.'

He tenderly raises her from her prostrate position, and takes her face between his hands and kisses her fiercely on the cheek and lips.

'Diana,' he says, hoarsely, 'why do you unman me so? Do you think that anything on earth could now step in between us two? Never—never—nothing shall

ever separate us. Of course I promise what you desire. If my friend was capable of attempting to put an end to our love for one another, I would never bear him any respect again.'

He speaks these words with a sudden passion, which carries him away. At this moment his old worship for George Grafton becomes as naught compared with the love he bears the girl. He folds her in his arms, murmuring fondly to her, and kissing her again and again.

'My little sister,' he whispers. 'Believe in me, and take comfort.'

She lies for a moment quietly in his embrace, and then she gently extricates herself with a sorrowful smile upon her lips.

'I am very happy, Frank,' she murmurs. 'I can never be unhappy, if I am only confident in your love. Now that you have promised—and I take it for an oath—that you will never desert me, come what may, I feel a new-born life permeating my system. Ah! Frank, I have been so miserable these last two days, thinking over the possibility of our friendship ending.'

He gently soothes her agitation, repeating over and over again his assurances of undying fidelity; and gradually, under the influence of his voice, she regains her spirits, and becomes herself once more.

Oh, how he loves her! He gazes at her winsome little form, and marks the dazzling beauty of her face, still bearing traces of her recent agitation, and he wonders to himself how it had been possible for him ever to have experienced happiness before he met her. She has now wound herself into his affections, and has become an integral factor of his existence. Henceforth, life would be impossible without his little sister-friend!

When they have both become more composed, he speaks to her on the subject of Loftus' remark. He tells her that he fears that his friend entertains very bitter feelings against her, and he cautions her to be careful to do nothing to annoy him.

'I am very vexed with the whole affair,' he says. 'In other respects he seems a capital fellow. But on this one point he is most unjust. I thought that I had better tell you of the matter.'

She thanks him warmly for his kind advice. She says that she is sorry beyond expression that she should have done anything to create Mr. Loftus' dislike. But she has not deserved it! She was his friend, until he took an unpardonable liberty which she was obliged to resent.

'But,' she adds, 'what has he been saying now?'

In spite of her attempts to discuss the matter calmly, he can see how deeply moved she is by the nervous quiver of her lips, and the ring of suppressed excitement in her tones.

'It was next to nothing,' he answers, reassuringly. 'It was only enough to show that he bore you ill-feeling. He wanted to cast a doubt on the genuineness of your illness yesterday, and he asserted that he saw you walking, in the afternoon, on the lower road.'

'Is that all?' she says, with a sigh of great relief. 'Dear Frank, I think that you are too sensitive on my account. Probably he was mistaken. He might have really thought he saw me; appearances are very often deceptive.'

'Well, yes—he said that you were some

way off,' says Grandby, willingly falling in with her idea.

'I really don't see anything to be annoyed at, Frank, in that,' she says, smiling. 'As I was in bed at the time, it is quite certain that he did not see me—and it is, most likely, all imagination on your part, thinking that he said it with a purpose.'

'I am so glad to hear you say so,' he answers—and glad he really is. He is only too anxious to be able to exonerate his friend from the imputation.

He has not mentioned to Miss Forsdyke the context of the remark. Even to her he has never yet been able to talk about his sister's grave.

'I ought to tell you,' he says, after a pause, 'that Loftus saw us as he passed through the wood the other day.'

'Saw us!' she repeats, in a startled whisper.

'Yes—he saw us. He admitted as much to me, but in such a way as to imply that he would be as secret as the grave.'

'But will he?' she says, quickly. 'Can we trust him?'

'Yes,' he answers, confidently, 'we can trust him—I am certain that he will hold

our secret sacred. I thought that it was only due to you to make him some explanation, so I confessed to him the nature of our friendship.'

'You did!' she says, hurriedly, seizing him by the arm. 'And—and what did he say?'

'Well,' says Grandby, in some confusion, remembering how his announcement was received, 'I must confess that his behaviour was different from what I had expected. Instead of being impressed with what I told him, he was most unmistakably amused, in so far that he actually rolled on to the floor, he laughed so much.'

'How like him! she says, laughing softly. 'I suppose he thought you were trying to take him in.'

'I don't know what he *thought*,' says Grandby, pointedly. 'Still, I know that he behaved very badly to me. But I bear him no grudge. He is such a peculiarly constituted chap that I doubt whether he even understood what I meant by a platonic friendship. At any rate, he did not seem to believe in it. And, Diana,' he adds, tenderly clasping her little hand, 'the thought has struck me that probably very

few people on earth would understand it or believe in it.'

'What does that matter, dear?' she says, nestling towards him, and leaning her head upon his arm. 'What does it matter if the whole world goes against us, so long as *we* understand it and believe in it?'

That evening after dinner Grandby, much to Mrs. Lamb's delight, spends half-an-hour in her private sitting-room. The night is fine, and the moon is just rising from behind a neighbouring range of hills, casting its subdued silvery tint over the majesty of the Himalayan creation, now seemingly wrapped in sleep.

They walk out to the verandah and gaze silently at the striking scene. From beneath rises the subtle perfume of the famous roses.

'I wonder who has the right to pick them,' he says, looking down at them with well-assumed indifference.

'The manager is very stingy,' she answers, with a discontented shrug of her lean shoulders. 'He grudges us every one we pick—but he can't prevent us all the same,' she adds, knowingly.

'So I perceive,' he says. 'I was noticing yesterday the extreme beauty of the roses on that little detached tree, there, by the corner of the house. In the evening I discovered that it had been divested of every single flower.'

'Not really!' she says, in a tone of surprise.

'Yes, really—and, knowing how particular the manager was, I thought it was rather a peculiar occurrence. I wonder who could have done it.'

'I wonder,' she repeats, musingly, to his intense disappointment, for he has been hoping that she may be able to enlighten him on the matter. 'They must have been picked when everyone was at the tennis tournament yesterday,' she continues, reflectively. 'Who *could* it have been? Now I come to think of it, I remember that just as I was leaving the grounds—I was very late, I am sorry to say, and Mr. Loftus *was* so angry when I did arrive,' she adds, with a little blush—'I saw Miss Forsdyke loitering about that corner of the house.'

Miss Forsdyke! How strange it is that this name always rises before him whatever may be the subject of conversation!

'That was impossible,' he says, calmly, glancing upwards at the moonlit sky. 'Miss Forsdyke was confined yesterday to her room with a bad headache.'

'Oh! But it was Miss Forsdyke,' cries Mrs. Lamb, with a sprightly laugh. 'I know that Indian muslin and light blue sash so well. She was standing there looking at that tree. And, now I remember, she had on a tea-apron,' she adds, conclusively.

Grandby is not in the least convinced. He experiences a feeling of amusement as he thinks of the different people who are ready to swear to having seen Miss Forsdyke on the preceding day. What first-rate witnesses they would make in a court of law!

'Does the tea-apron prove your point?' he says, smiling.

'Oh! you naughty boy! How dare you laugh at me like that!' she cries, with a roguish little shake of the head. 'I merely mentioned the apron because I thought she probably put it on to carry away the roses in. Won't she catch it just, if she be found out!'

'I can assure you that you are mistaken,' he says, smiling confidently. 'Miss Fors-

dyke never left her room for one moment yesterday. I am quite certain of the fact.'

'Well, it is very strange then,' she says, thoughtfully. 'How my eyes could have so deceived me, I can't make out! But of course,' she adds, archly, 'I won't attempt to doubt *your* word. In some mysterious way you are always quite *au fait* with the doings of that very pretty girl. Is it a case of congratulations?'

'How can you ask?' he murmurs, gallantly. 'Don't you know that there is only one woman in the world whom I admire?' and he points his speech by raising her hand and kissing it.

'Oh!'

She gives a little scream—of delight! Her poor, faded face lights up with a gleam of rapture which almost makes it pretty in the soft light of the moon, and then she turns away with a bashful inclination of the head. It is quite evident that she would be nothing loth to find herself engaged in an innocent flirtation with Mr. Grandby.

'How *could* you?' she says, in a shy whisper.

'Well, you know I mean it,' he says,

bending towards her, and enjoying the situation immensely. He has never felt less amorous in his life, but he is very light-hearted to-night at the prospect of the probable arrival of his dear old friend on the morrow.

'Ah! what flatterers you men are!' she says, with a tender sigh. 'Who can trust one word that is uttered by your perfidious sex?'

He continues talking in this semi-idiotic strain for the next quarter-of-an-hour, and then he intimates that he is sadly afraid that he must tear himself away. He has some *very* important correspondence which will not stand delay, he says, telling a downright falsehood with a charming ease of manner.

'Good-night,' she says, softly, holding out her hand. 'I shall always remember this happy evening.'

'And you may be sure,' he replies earnestly, raising her hand to his lips, 'that I shall not forget it to the hour of my death;' and he leaves the room, laughing inwardly at the absurdity of the situation.

He finds his servant awaiting him in his own little hut with a telegram in his hand.

'It came shortly after the sahib went to dinner,' he says.

'Then why the deuce wasn't it brought to me before?'

'The sahib gave no orders,' says the servant, quietly.

'You blockhead—how could I give orders when I knew nothing about it? Wait there a moment;' and he hurriedly tears it open.

It is from George Grafton, and runs as follows:

'*Do not expect me; leave is postponed. Am writing by post.*'

Grandby, dropping the telegram, picks up a book from off the table and discharges it with deadly effect at the astonished native's head!

CHAPTER XV.

OPACITY OF THE CORNEA.

In the meanwhile Mrs. Stockton has been anxiously awaiting some result from her last manœuvre.

But in this respect she is grievously disappointed, for, as far as she can see, nothing has happened as yet to upset the equilibrium of Miss Forsdyke. Strive as she may, she can arrive at no intelligent solution of the mystery connected with that letter. Who is George Grafton of the Engineers? What is he to Miss Forsdyke? Why has she displayed such a strange agitation on that eventful evening? Why has she been so anxious first of all to post the letter, and then, half-an-hour later, to get it back? What does she mean by a *solemn covenant?* None of these questions

can the old lady answer to her satisfaction, and, feeling certain as she does that there is more in the matter than meets the eye, she redoubles her watchfulness, and prowls up and down the corridor, and in and out of the house, on all occasions of the day, in the hopes of unexpectedly discovering some enlightening clue.

But in this she fails! She has met Miss Forsdyke once or twice upon the staircase during the last two days, and she has noticed that she has been looking a trifle paler than usual, but she has had no opportunity of addressing her. Once, when she did attempt to speak in her oleaginous manner, Miss Forsdyke cast upon her a look of contemptuous scorn, and passed her by in silence, which act goaded her revengeful spirit to little short of madness.

In the last week her unfortunate temper has quite gained the mastery over her better judgment. She knows that she is hated and despised by every inmate of the hotel, and, in consequence, she bears an enmity against one and all. She is impregnated with the desire to make herself disagreeable—it matters not to whom; as

long as she can cause some one else annoyance, she is satisfied.

But, against Miss Forsdyke, her feeling is more than one of mere irritation; it is malicious, spiteful, revengeful hate. She cannot forget her terrible humiliation in the presence of the girl and Mrs. Renfrew, and, as she is powerless to retaliate on the latter, in consequence of her never for one moment leaving her private rooms, she concentrates all her energies against the former. She is determined to humble her, and—if possible—to crush her!

The vague rumours, concerning some scandalous episode in Miss Forsdyke's former life, have not escaped her vigilant sense of hearing, and she attempts by judicious questioning and cross-examination to elucidate the matter. But in this she fails.

Her attempts are somewhat circumscribed from the fact that she can never obtain a civil answer from any of the ladies of the hotel. They have one and all combined to avoid her as much as possible, and, if she ever happens to address them, they give her a short reply and hurry on.

But, she possesses two or three kindred spirits in Doonga, and it is to them that she goes in her search for information. But though these worthy females strive their utmost to give her what she wants, they can discover nothing tangible against Miss Forsdyke's character. That there exists some vague slur on the young lady's name, they all admit, but what its exact nature none of them can say, nor can they gain any information concerning it.

Nothing has yet been heard of the faithless Colonel Stockton. She has a pretty shrewd suspicion that he is in Kashmir, but in what locality she has not the least idea, and she feels the utter hopelessness in starting off to find him. So she remains on in the hotel, never daring to face the dinner-table, nursing her feelings of revenge against her husband and the rest of mankind. The gallant colonel's prospect of peace for the future looks very small. Maiwand and Ahmed Kehl will sink into insignificance before the desperate encounter in store for him on his arrival *home!*

Mrs. Stockton has every word of that mysterious letter engraven on her mind,

and so her perplexity increases, when two days pass, and Mrs. Renfrew shows no intention of starting for the Gullies. It was the immediate fulfilment of this projected movement that had caused Miss Forsdyke to write the letter to George Grafton of the Engineers—and Mrs. Stockton's suspicion deepens when she discovers from the manager that the two ladies have no idea whatever of leaving the hotel. They have, in fact, he says, agreed to remain till the fifteenth of October; on no other condition would he have consented to board them at a reduced rate. Mystified beyond measure, Mrs. Stockton departs, murmuring that, if such be the case, she supposes that she must rest content with her present rooms; for her ostensible motive in introducing the subject was to ask permission to change into Mrs. Renfrew's suite of apartments as soon as that lady vacated them.

This last piece of information confirms her suspicion that the letter in question was no ordinary one. Miss Forsdyke, besides having displayed an extraordinary agitation regarding it, has, for some unfathomable reason, told a downright falsehood in it; and Mrs. Stockton resolutely

determines not to rest until she has discovered the *raison d'être* of the whole affair.

On consideration, she finds that her only possible chance of gaining an insight into the affair will be to possess herself of the answer to the letter, and the dishonourable nature of this method does not much trouble her extremely elastic conscience. In fact, she argues to herself that she is quite justified in adopting *any* means in order to unearth the deceitful viper!

The post is brought up daily from the plains in the mail-tonga, which starts from Garamabad in the early morning, accomplishing the forty-miles of up-hill journey in about five hours, and arriving at Doonga about eleven. It is the custom of the hotel, on the arrival of the bag, for the letters to be placed in neat array on the small table, standing beneath the letter-box in the hall, the inmates of the hotel being expected to come in person to remove them; so that Mrs. Stockton feels that, with a little skill, she will have no difficulty in carrying out her design.

With this intention, on Saturday morn-

ing—three days after the incident of the letter—she betakes herself about eleven o'clock to the garden, to watch for the arrival of the postman. It is not long before she descries him, with his bag slung across his shoulder, toiling up the rocky short cut to the hotel. She hurriedly approaches him, and orders him to open the bag for her inspection. She is expecting a very important letter, she says, and she cannot wait till the manager has arranged them in the hall. The postman expresses his great sorrow at being unable to comply with her demand, but unfortunately the bag is locked, and the key is in the possession of the sahib.

Foiled in her attempt, she walks round to the hotel door, and remains there to all intents and purposes innocently engaged in admiring the famous *Gloires-de-Dijon.*

Within the space of a few minutes, a servant of the hotel appears, carrying the bag, which is now unlocked. He enters the hall and empties the bag of its contents, placing the letters in four neat rows upon the table. Mrs. Stockton, smelling the flowers with a furious avidity, watches

his every movement, and as he disappears she enters the hall and approaches the table.

There are about two dozen letters in all, and she rapidly casts her eyes over the addresses in search of the expected name. At last it meets her view—a neat little envelope, with 'Miss Forsdyke' written in a firm, manly handwriting.

Now to examine the post-mark. She pounces on it, and eagerly scrutinizes the exterior. It is all right—the post-mark is 'Sihayipur.' She gives vent to a chuckle of delight, and is about to transfer it to her pocket, when it is suddenly snatched from her hand by some one standing behind her. She turns sharply round, and, to her intense confusion, finds herself face to face with Diana Forsdyke, who is standing regarding her with flaming cheeks and flashing eyes.

'How dare you!' cries the girl, indignantly.

After the first shock, Mrs. Stockton soon regains her customary self-assurance. Her plans being still so immatured, she has no wish that Miss Forsdyke should penetrate at present the revengeful feelings which

she bears towards her; so she affects a look of astonishment, and blandly asks her what she means.

'Mean!' cries Diana, vehemently—'what do I mean? I ask you how you dare to meddle with my private letters? I distinctly saw you about to place it in your pocket. I was watching you for several moments before I moved.'

'You were quite mistaken, dear Miss Forsdyke,' says Mrs. Stockton, suavely; 'I was merely dusting the letter against my dress. By accident I dropped it on the floor, and it was slightly soiled, and—'

'That's enough,' says Miss Forsdyke, shortly. 'I tell you that I was watching you, and saw the whole affair. You need not attempt to excuse yourself by concocting base falsehoods, for I shall not believe you;' and she turns away, and moves up the staircase with the *hauteur* of an empress.

There is a savage scowl upon Mrs. Stockton's face as she follows her with her eyes, and then she lifts her hand, and shakes her clenched fist towards her.

'I will be even with you yet,' she mutters; 'I will trample out those stuck-up

airs and graces, Miss—Diana—Forsdyke!'

At this moment Grandby enters the hall, with the purpose of ascertaining whether Grafton's promised letter of explanation has arrived. He notes her angry gesture, and, following the direction of her arm, to his surprise he sees Miss Forsdyke disappearing in the distance. In a moment he understands that there has been some stormy encounter between the two.

'Good-morning, Mrs. Stockton,' he says, pleasantly. 'I am so sorry to hear that you have been ill. I trust that you are better.'

'I am much better, thank you, Mr. Grandby,' she rejoins, shortly, 'though none the better for your asking.'

'Ah! I am sorry to hear that,' he says, good-humouredly. 'I was hoping that the knowledge of my tender solicitation after your welfare would have a beneficial effect upon your health.'

She gives him a scowl, and says nothing. She has been of late so much confined to her own company that her customary facility of repartee has grown somewhat rusty, and she is half afraid to cross swords with the sharp wit of this young man.

She turns away to the table, and makes a pretence of examining the letters.

'Do you see a letter for me, Mrs. Stockton?' he says, placing himself by her side, and commencing to scrutinize the rows of letters before him.

'No, I don't,' she says, shortly; but as she speaks her eye falls upon his name written in the same manly hand as she has just seen upon Miss Forsdyke's letter. She takes it up and reads the post-mark.

'Sihayipur,' she says, grimly, handing it to him. 'So you belong to the solemn covenant, do you? It strikes me that I am living in a regular nest of conspirators.'

'It strikes me that you are talking great nonsense,' he says, coolly, taking the letter.

Her mode of address is distinctly offensive, and he feels no inclination to waste politeness on her.

'Ha! ha!' she laughs, derisively. 'You are a pretty trio! Yourself, Miss Forsdyke, and George Grafton of the Engineers!'

He starts back as if he had been shot. What in the world of wonder does the woman mean? And by what power on

earth has she become acquainted with the name of the writer of this letter?

She notes his look of amazement, and laughs gleefully.

'Ah, you may well look astonished!' she says. 'That letter in your hand is from George Grafton of the Engineers, quartered at Sihayipur. And by this same post Miss Forsdyke has also heard from him. A solemn covenant indeed! A combination of scandalous infamy is what I call it.'

What does she mean? He is too amazed to speak. A solemn covenant! To what does she refer? Can she have become acquainted with his clandestine intimacy with Miss Forsdyke? A cold feeling of dread runs through him at the bare thought of his secret being in the possession of this unscrupulous fury.

'You are talking like a madwoman,' he retorts, coolly. 'What you choose to mean, I can't conceive. But, in saying that Miss Forsdyke has heard from George Grafton, I know that you are telling a deliberate falsehood. I happen to know that she is unacquainted with him.'

'You are extremely polite, Mr. Grand-

by,' she says, with heavy sarcasm. 'A fig for your pretended knowledge! I tell you that she heard from him to-day, and not only that, but she *wrote* to him on Wednesday night. I saw the letter.'

For a moment he stands dumbfounded before her, unable to shake off the horrible suspicion overcoming him. And then all his great faith in the integrity of his sister-friend rises with an overwhelming force, and takes possession of his soul.

'I do not believe a word you say,' he cries, hotly. 'You will excuse my forcible language, Mrs. Stockton, but you will allow me to tell you that I consider that you have, for some low purpose of your own, deliberately told a *lie*. I will wish you a good-morning;' and, so saying, he wheels round and strides out of the house.

He walks over to his little hut, and, slamming the door behind him, throws himself down into his arm-chair. He is feeling very angry with himself for having given way to his temper in such a reprehensible manner. But, good heavens—how could he help it? What did that terrible old woman mean by her mysterious insinu-

ations? How much does she know of his private affairs, and how on earth has she obtained her knowledge?

He is deeply puzzled. The knowledge which she has displayed regarding him is little short of extraordinary. She has named to him the writer of his letter, giving to his friend his title, name, and address; she has referred to the existence of a solemn covenant between himself and Miss Forsdyke; and she has confessed to a most intimate knowledge of this young lady's private affairs. Not that he places the least credence in this latter point! As he has told Mrs. Stockton, he believes it to have been a base fabrication, invented on her part for some inscrutable reason of her own.

Her intention has evidently been to damage Miss Forsdyke's character in his eyes, which shows, at any rate, that she must be aware of the intimate relationship which exists between them. But she has failed in her desire. He smiles contemptuously to himself at the very idea of any words uttered by this irascible old woman having any effect on the faith he has in the integrity of his little friend. If any-

thing, it has made her dearer to him than she was before, for it has shown him that she possesses a relentless enemy of a bold, unscrupulous character, and that in consequence she is all the more in need of his brotherly protection.

He carefully examines the exterior of the letter, thinking that possibly George might have scribbled his name on the outside, and so afforded to Mrs. Stockton the peculiar knowledge which she has displayed; but there is nothing of the kind—beyond his own name and address, there is nothing written on the envelope, and the thickness of the paper precludes the possibility of the contents being read through it. So, dismissing the subject in despair of arriving at any plausible solution, he tears open the letter, and prepares to discover the inexplicable reason of George Grafton's change of plans.

This is what he reads:

'DEAR OLD FRANK,

'I suppose you got my telegram all right. It must have taken you by surprise, and I am vain enough to flatter myself that you were not a little dis-

appointed on mastering its contents. The truth is I have had a letter from my *fiancée*, and, from what she says, she must in some way or other have gained a complete insight into my immediate plans, for she refers to them clearly and lucidly, without an error of any sort. I am afraid, my dear Frank, that you are playing a double part. You have never mentioned to me your intimacy with my future wife, but I feel convinced that you know her well, and that you must also have shown to her my last letter, for to no one else have I spoken of my private arrangements for the future. I hope you like her, and that, long before this, you have conquered any prejudice which you may have conceived against her. Now, confess, old boy, have I not cause for deeming myself the happiest man in all creation? Is she not a perfect treasure, and am I not justified in feeling proud in having gained her love? Ah! Frank, I cannot tell you what my feelings are! I am only conscious that I have done nothing in this world to deserve such happiness. How can people scoff and disbelieve, when it is possible for this earth to become such a perfect paradise? She

writes to me that she and her aunt intend to take a trip into the Gullies, and thence on to Abbottabad, for the next few weeks, and suggests, in consequence, that I should change my plans, and decide to take the last three weeks. This, of course, I gladly agreed to. I shall therefore not appear till September the twenty-fifth. To-day is the seventh, so there are not three weeks to wait before I clasp her in my arms, and receive the right to call her my own for evermore. It is a great disappointment to me to have to postpone our meeting, but I fully appreciate her kindness in having broken silence, and written to me explaining the position. My colonel started on leave to-day; I think that he was glad, when I decided to take the latter half, for the hot weather has totally knocked him up. Expecting to hear from you shortly, telling me how thoroughly disgusted you are at my change of plans, I remain,

'Yours affectionately,

'GEORGE GRAFTON.'

Grandby lays down the letter in perplexity. In what possible way could Miss Rigby have gained a knowledge of his

friend's immediate plans? And then he smiles, for a light breaks upon him, removing all semblance of a mystery. He has told Loftus the contents of George's last letter, and Loftus of course has repeated it to Miss Rigby! The solution is self-evident. It is news to him, though, that Miss Rigby and her aunt are purposing to leave Doonga for a period, and he rather wonders that Loftus has made no mention of the circumstance, for to imagine that the latter is ignorant of the fact of 'the bewitching Emily's' departure is literally absurd.

As he is thus musing, he suddenly becomes conscious of his own name being called from without, and, walking to the door, he perceives Loftus, reclining indolently in his saddle, at the bottom of the little slope leading up to his hut.

He walks quickly towards him with a smile upon his face.

'This is an unexpected honour,' he says. 'You must have a very weighty reason for this display of energy so early in the day.'

Loftus smiles affably.

'My dear boy,' he says, 'you left me so suddenly yesterday that I felt quite anxious for your health. So I thought

that I would exert myself this morning, and come and make kind enquiries concerning you. I hope that you are better,' he adds, with an assumption of tender interest.

'Oh! I am quite well, thank you,' returns Grandby, with a somewhat heightened colour. 'You must excuse my abrupt departure—my temper of late has become abominable. But really, Loftus, your behaviour was calculated to try a saint.'

A wave of merriment crosses Loftus' face.

'Oh! Grandby, for goodness sake be silent!' he says, imploringly. 'Remember my position! My seat is anything but firm, and I am at present poised in the air, thirteen and a half hands from terra firma, A fall from such a height might ruin me for life.'

'I certainly have no intention of referring to the matter again,' says Grandby, majestically. 'After the way'

'Ah! that's a good boy! You are a perfect brick!' says Loftus, in a relieved tone. 'If you only knew what I suffered afterwards, you would really pity me! I

had such a horrible pain in the pit of my stomach that I thought I must have ruptured an artery. The doctor said it was truffles and lobster salad! Disgusting want of poetry, wasn't it?—But all M.D.'s are soulless animals.'

'I trust you are alright now,' says Grandby. 'You contorted your body in such a downright, idiotic fashion that I really don't wonder at your feeling ill.'

'Yes—I am better now,' replies Loftus, cheerfully. 'But let us change the subject. The very thought of it is giving me a qualm. Let me tell you, old chap, that my feeling for you is more than one of mere admiration—it is *wonder*—positive wonder! As the author of the magnificent conception which you confided to me yesterday, your brain I consider to be the most perfectly developed organ in existence. The idea is marvellous—breath-taking—stupendous!'

'Anything more?' says Grandby, coolly. 'Don't gesticulate so violently, or you will really tumble off.'

'I have nothing more to say!' says Loftus, with a majestic intonation of the voice. 'I have paid my feeble tribute to

the shrine of intellect, and I have done my duty. And now, old chap,'—relapsing into his customary careless tones—'I want you to come and dine with me to-morrow at half-past seven.'

'Right you are!' says Grandby, heartily. 'I will be punctual to the minute. But, I say, Loftus—I am surprised that you are so cheerful, considering that she is about to go away.'

'What do you mean? Now, none of your gammon, my boy. You will find Vernon Loftus more than a match at that playful little game.'

'I am not joking,' replies Grandby, smiling. 'I was referring to Miss Rigby. I heard to-day that she was going immediately into the Gullies for three weeks.'

'Now, steady on! Aren't you coming it just a *leetle* bit too strong? Whoever could have told you such a magnificent lie as that?'

'I heard it from the very best authority,' says Grandby, confidently. 'I am quite convinced about the fact.'

'Then you may tell the very best authority, with Vernon Loftus' compliments, that he is an *a*-double-*s*—*ass!*' says Loftus,

bluntly. 'Whoever heard of such a farcical notion! The idea of the bewitching Emily leaving Doonga now, when everybody is becoming lively—and for the Gullies, of all places in this world! Rot, sir—rot!'

'I can quite understand your chagrin,' says Grandby, placidly. 'Presumably she has made her plans, and kept you in the dark. You have certainly been treated badly. Perhaps you will believe me, when I tell you that I heard the news from one who *ought* to know—in fact, from George Grafton.'

'George Grafton!' cries Loftus, indignantly. 'And who the devil may George—Oh! holy Moses, you're at that old game again, are you? Well, of all the bumble-headed individuals I have ever had the pleasure of meeting, you are the very bumble-headiest. Will *nothing* convince you that you are wrong?'

'Nothing!' says Grandby, firmly.

'Then you may smother me to death with gruyère cheese, if you ain't the drollest chap in Christendom!'

Strangely enough, when the two young men separate three minutes afterwards, they both make the same remark, in the

same contemptuous manner, which runs as follows:

'How is it possible that he can be so absurdly blind?'

CHAPTER XVI.

FURTHER OPACITY OF THE CORNEA.

Grandby returns to his house, and sits down immediately to answer Grafton's letter. He tells him how terribly disappointed he is at his change of plans, though he admits that he has acted only as he should have done; and then he adds, with just a touch of bitterness,

'Of course I know that, for the future, I shall be nothing and she will be everything in your eyes, but it will take me some time yet before I fully grasp the facts of my debasement. I have been for so many years first in your thoughts that you must allow that it is no easy matter for me to understand at once that I have been *shunted*.'

He then mentions the fact of his having

called on Miss Rigby, but he utterly disclaims having shown her his letter.

He is too honest to say anything in the girl's favour for the purpose of pleasing his friend; he merely writes, with characteristic straight-forwardness,

'Candidly speaking, dear George, I don't like her; and, if you will excuse me saying so, I don't think you have chosen well at all. As far as I can judge, she is the very last person to suit you as a wife. Having seen so little of her, perhaps it may seem presumptuous on my part to offer an opinion, but I am a firm believer in first impressions, as you may remember—and my first impression, in this particular case, is, I regret to say, one of antipathy. You may imagine how it grieves me to have to write these words, but, never having deceived you from the day I saw you first, I cannot bring myself to do so now; and I feel sure that you will not take offence nor think the worse of me for having openly confessed the truth.'

It is a great relief to him to disburden his mind in this way to his friend. For days he has been conscious in his heart that he dislikes Miss Rigby—every single

thing that he has heard or seen of her has been distasteful to him, and, strive as he can, he cannot conquer his prejudice against her. And, in not disclosing the fact to his friend, he has experienced an uncomfortable feeling that he has been acting treacherously towards him. Better, he argues, to tell him point-blank that he dislikes the girl than to play the hypocrite on the subject.

It was Grandby's custom, when he happened to be in his own room of an afternoon, to seat himself at the window and to watch for Miss Forsdyke to leave the garden, and then, after the lapse of a certain time, to follow her. His little, isolated dwelling-place was situated on the top of a grassy mound. The doorway was placed on the side facing the hotel, and from it a little path led down to the main building. His windows fronted the garden—and, beyond the gravel-path encircling his hut, the soft, green turf sloped down for about ten to twelve feet until it reached the road, on the other side of which was another gentle slope, leading down to the lawn and asphalte tennis-court.

It was by this road that Miss Forsdyke

usually left the grounds when proceeding to the wood, so that, practically, she passed within a few feet of him. But he never told her that he watched for her exit, for fear lest she might betray herself to any casual observer by glancing pointedly in his direction. He used to sit behind the red muslin valance hung across his window, effectually screened himself but capable of seeing everything outside.

On this particular afternoon he is at his post with a book in his hand—Morris' 'Songs of Two Worlds.' He takes up his position by the window, and, about a quarter-to-four, he sees Miss Forsdyke's winsome little form issue from the hotel and proceed slowly along the road beneath him. Unperceived himself, he watches her with an eager eye. She is dressed scrupulously neatly in her glossy, brown Newmarket coat, setting off her matchless little figure to perfection, with a veil of the same colour half concealing her face, and he gazes in rapture at her as she passes beneath his window. Oh, how he loves her! Every day that passes seems to increase his love! Life to him now would be impossible without her!

Suddenly another figure appears from the opposite direction. It is the heavy form of Mrs. Stockton, who has been prowling about the garden since lunch. She advances towards the girl and stops in front of her.

'Ah! Miss Forsdyke!' she says, in those disagreeable tones he knows so well by this time, 'you are about to take a stroll, are you? Perhaps you will allow me to accompany you.'

'I beg that you will excuse me, Mrs. Stockton,' answers the girl, coldly. 'I would prefer to go alone.'

'You are very polite, I am sure!' says the old woman, with a sneer. 'I wonder where you learnt your manners.'

'I should not come to you if I wanted tuition in that respect,' flashes Diana, her eyes ablaze with scorn. 'No—Mrs. Stockton—after your behaviour of this morning, the less I see of you the better.'

'Oh—really—you don't mean it!' remarks Mrs. Stockton, with heavy sarcasm. 'You are very high and haughty now, young lady, but you take care what you are doing, or perhaps your pride may have a sudden fall.'

'Do your worst!' cries the girl, defiantly. 'Spy, and sneak, and prowl about to your heart's content—you can't hurt me!'

'We shall see about that,' rejoins the old woman, grimly. 'Don't you be too sure, Miss Forsdyke! It was a bad day for you when you insulted *me*.'

'*Insulted* you!' cries Diana, with a ring of high contempt. 'I suppose you refer to my having caught you eavesdropping at my door. Ah! that was a highly lady-like proceeding on your part, was it not, Mrs. Stockton?'

'I shall be even with you yet,' growls the old woman, savagely, maddened at the humiliating recollection. 'Pray, will you tell me, Miss Forsdyke, when you purpose starting for the Gullies?'

'The Gullies!' exclaims the girl, turning a trifle pale.

'Yes—the Gullies, Miss Forsdyke!' says Mrs. Stockton, mimicking her startled manner. 'The Gullies—and from thence on to Abbottabad. I understood that it was your intention to go immediately, and I admit to being curious at this inexplicable delay.'

'Ah!'

A sudden cry escapes the girl, and she takes a hurried step forward.

'It was you, was it?' she hisses between her teeth, so low as to be inaudible to Grandby. 'It was you who took my letter and kept it, and afterwards posted it. Now I understand—you took it and *read* it! Let me pass! I will not stand another moment in your vile presence.'

'No—no—not quite so fast!' says Mrs. Stockton, standing in her way, 'I wish to discuss the *solemn covenant!* *You* are a nice sort'

'*Will* you let me pass?'

'Not till I have said my say! I wish you to understand that I know'

'Let me pass at once, Mrs. Stockton, or I will call for help!'

The girl's eyes are blazing fire, and she is looking a very empress in her wrath. Grandby, feeling the hot blood coursing through his veins, looks at her in the deepest admiration, unable to decide exactly what to do.

'No, you won't!' says Mrs. Stockton, grimly. 'Unless it be your wish that I should blazon to the whole world'

'I will not remain here to be so insulted,' says Diana, indignantly. 'I will at once report the matter to the manager.'

She turns round to effect her purpose. In a moment Mrs. Stockton is beside her, and has grasped her by the arm. A cry of pain escapes her as she struggles violently to disengage herself—and Grandby can remain silent no longer. White with anger he tears aside the valance, and shoves his head out of the window.

'You darned old frump!' he cries out, furiously, beside himself with passion. 'If you dare to touch that lady I will smash your bonnet flat! Leave her alone this instant, or I will have you marched straight off to the lock-up!'

Petrified with astonishment at the sudden interruption, Mrs. Stockton looses her hold and turns towards him.

'Ah! it is you, is it?' she says, shaking her fist towards him. 'Another of the solemn covenant on the spy! *You* can take care too or'

'Shut your jaw unless you want to be throttled!' cries Grandby, at the top of his voice. 'I have had enough of your non-

sense. If you don't behave as a lady, you cannot expect to be treated as such. I say, Diana, are you hurt?'

'Oh!, it is *Diana*, is it?' cries Mrs. Stockton, with a malicious burst of laughter. 'Diana—and Frank—and George! Ah! this is a pretty secret I have discovered, to be sure!'

In a moment Grandby is aware of the terrible slip that he has made. He looks from one another in confusion, and then he silently signs to Diana to go. She sees the signal and understands it, and without a word she turns in the direction of the gate.

'Mrs. Stockton,' he says, quietly, 'you have to-day caused me to speak to you in a very ungentlemanly manner. This I sincerely regret, and I trust that you will permit me to apologise. At the same time I wish you to understand that I never in the future desire that you should address me again. If you do, you will probably again be unpleasantly surprised;' saying which, he closes the window with a bang, without waiting to hear the old woman's probably furious reply.

In another quarter-of-an-hour he emerges

through the back-door, leading out of his bath-room, and finds the coast clear. Mrs. Stockton has betaken her angry person away to brood over his insulting words in the seclusion of her private room.

He does not fear the old woman, but, at the same time, he does not under-estimate her powers of doing harm. Had his own existence been perfectly open and straightforward he would have laughed her threats to scorn! But unfortunately it is not so! He is embarked on a venture of secrecy and intrigue, involving an innocent girl's good name, and consequently, if not for his own sake, for her sake it is imperative that he should take every precaution to prevent the whispers of scandalous tongues.

Should Mrs. Stockton once suspect his intimacy with Diana, he is well aware that she will not rest until she has thoroughly exposed them. And he more than fears that her suspicions *have* been awakened from her having coupled their names together in what she calls 'a solemn covenant;' though why she should include George Grafton in the covenant he cannot conceive; nor can he imagine how she has become aware of the fact of his friend's

very existence. It is all very mysterious to him, and no amount of thought on his part helps to elucidate the matter.

He speaks to Diana on the subject this afternoon, and she fully agrees with him that there is cause for much apprehension on their part. She is very nervous and *distraite*, with a tendency at times to become hysterical, and all his efforts to compose her are in vain. She talks in a hurried, excited manner, as though her mind were oppressed with some great weight, and at times she answers him in such an incoherent way that he becomes half afraid that she is far from well.

'Let us dismiss the subject from our minds,' he says, soothingly. 'Since you had that fearful headache, you have not been yourself at all. Are you sure, dear, that you are not suffering still?'

'No—not bodily—only mentally,' she says, in a weary tone. 'Why does that woman hate me, and what does she mean by her mysterious imputations?'

'I really do not understand,' he says, speaking in a cheerful voice. 'But it is no good brooding over the matter. If the

worst comes to the worst, she cannot really do you any harm.'

'Ah!—but she can—she can,' she answers, piteously, with a slight shiver. 'You do not know—you do not understand.'

'Yes, I do!' he answers, stoutly; 'the only thing she can do is to expose our meetings here—and, supposing she does, what then? We are so strong in our own innocence that we shall have no difficulty in convincing other people'

He does not really think so—in fact, he knows that it would be an utter impossibility to convince society of the friendly nature of their affection for one another. But in saying so his object is to try to calm her agitation.

In this he is not successful. She shivers faintly, and draws closer towards him, and he casts a protecting arm around her waist.

'It is very silly of me to be so frightened,' she whispers, 'but I cannot help myself. What does she mean by a *solemn covenant?* And what does she mean by asking me when I am going to leave Doonga? I am not going to leave Doonga

—I have never thought of such a thing;' and she raises her eyes towards him with an expression of innocent wonder.

'I can't conceive, either,' he answers, with a little laugh. 'She is a prying, sneaking old woman, and it is quite evident that she bears a grudge against us both. But as yet her discoveries are entirely in her own imngination. It is a comfort to think that she has got hold of the wrong end of the stick. Why, she actually told me that you had written to George Grafton, of all people in the world! If I had not been so angry with her, I should have laughed in her face.'

'No, I cannot conceive her object in telling such downright falsehoods,' whispers Diana, slowly. 'It seems as though she wanted to make mischief between us, and thought that this fabrication would raise your suspicions against me. But it hasn't, has it, Frank?' she continues, glancing anxiously up into his face. 'I feel certain that you will never doubt me again.'

'Never!' he answers, quickly, tightening the pressure of his arm. 'You need never fear for that, Diana. And why she should

think that it would make me angry to know that you had written to dear old George, I can't conceive. It would make me the happiest man alive to see you and him friends.'

'Perhaps we shall be some day,' she whispers. 'But, however much I wished to please you, I could hardly write to him when he is a perfect stranger, could I?' and she looks up at him with a half-amused expression on her face.

'Well, I suppose not,' he laughs. 'But Mrs. Stockton seems to think it possible. It is really quite laughable the gigantic mare's-nest she has discovered. She not only told me that you wrote to him, but she said that you had received a reply from him to-day.'

'What ridiculous nonsense!' cries Diana, indignantly. 'I caught the old wretch examining my letter, and actually on the point of putting it in her pocket. The post-mark was "Sihayipur," and I suppose that is why she thought Mr. Grafton had written it. Unfortunately for her calculations and conclusions,' she adds, with a contemptuous little laugh, 'my father also lives at Sihayipur, and it was he who wrote it.'

'Yes, she is evidently on the wrong tack,' he says, with a merry laugh.

'Did you hear all we said to one another, Frank dear?' she asks, timidly, placing her hand in his.

'Yes, I think I heard every word. You gave it to her well—I was looking on in admiration at the courage you displayed.'

'Then you heard me accuse her of reading one of my letters?'

'Yes, and she did not deny it, either.'

'No, she couldn't. As sure as I am sitting here, she opened and read a letter which I wrote to my father on Wednesday night. From what she said, I am fully convinced on the point. When I posted it, she was prowling about the stairs, and half-an-hour afterwards I went down to get it again—for I had omitted something important—and it was gone. I met her again on the stairs, and she told me that the post went out at nine. That isn't true, is it?'

'No, of course not. The post goes out early in the day, to allow the tonga to descend the hill in daylight. But did your father get the letter?'

'Yes, he got it, but, after having read it, she probably posted it. Luckily, there was nothing important in it; but it only shows, Frank, what an unscrupulous wretch she is.'

'It is scandalous—infamous!' he cries, indignantly. 'The woman ought to be cut by the whole community. What an awful life the colonel must lead!'

She gives vent to a soft ripple of laughter, which it does his heart good to hear.

'Has he been heard of lately?' she asks.

'Yes—Major Lamb heard from him yesterday. He says that he is enjoying himself immensely, and that he is happier now than he has been for years, poor chap.'

'It must be an awful thing to be unhappily married,' she says, with sudden gravity. 'I hope to God that such will never be my fate.'

'You—Diana!' he cries, raising her hand to his lips and kissing it. 'You must never marry—neither of us must. We must live always for one another.'

'Ah!' she says, with a little sigh, her delicate skin tinged with colour, 'that can never be. In a month's time you will go

away from me, and perhaps we shall never meet again.'

'We shall—we must!' he cries, fiercely, hungrily gazing at her lovely face. 'Do you think that I could bear to lose you now? You have become a part of my very life, and I could not live without you. In the summer we shall always meet—wherever you go I shall follow for my leave—and in the winter we must write—often, every week—and tell each other of all the details of our lives.'

'Yes,' she says, leaning her glorious little sun-gold head upon his shoulder, 'you must come. You must not leave me, and forsake me, and forget me—I could not stand it, you have become so very dear to me. But, Frank, dear Frank,'—softly stroking his cheek with her little ungloved hand,—'some day you may fall in love—*real* love, you know—and then what will become of your poor little sister-friend?'

'Never—it is impossible,' he whispers, bending down and gazing with a look of ineffable tenderness into the depths of her liquid eyes. 'My heart is not large enough to contain another love. It is yours, and

yours alone—and no other image can ever take its place. Ah! Diana, my little darling, surely a love like this is more elevating than a sickly, sentimental passion, craving after matrimony!'

CHAPTER XVII.

TOTAL BLINDNESS.

The next day is Sunday, the third Sabbath that Grandby has spent in the Himalayas. And what an eventful three weeks they have been! He has experienced more happiness and suffered more anxiety in these last twenty days than he can remember to have done for years. There has been the anxiety connected with his sister's grave, the anxiety connected with his friend's engagement, and the anxiety arising from his intimacy with Miss Forsdyke.

And what has been the joy? Ah, the joy of being Miss Forsdyke's devoted friend, of having by his own efforts changed her from a desponding being into a merry, laughing girl, has more than compensated

him for what he has suffered. The joy has so predominated that it has made of him a different being; it has altered his whole character, has given him a new zest in life, has caused him to view all things in a happier spirit. It has swept away his habitual reserve of manner, and has given him in its place an open-hearted *bon-camaraderie* eminently suitable to his agreeable countenance.

He is conscious of this change himself. He feels more light-hearted and sociable than of yore, and he no longer hankers after seclusion such as he had loved before, when his chief delight had been to shut himself up in his own room and to muse idly over some pleasant book. His honest young heart has appreciably expanded, causing him to view in a lenient spirit other human beings whose different tastes and modes of thought had formerly jarred upon his nerves. He has shaken off that air of cynical austerity which had been so ill-adapted to his youthful years. And it is to Miss Forsdyke's gentle influence that he owes this beneficial change. Is it to be wondered at that his love for her increases every day?

He never attempts to analyse the nature of his love. He is so confident in its purely platonic character, that such a notion never crosses his mind. He is only conscious that it exists, and that it has absorbed all other thoughts and feelings, and that it is reciprocated, and that, consequently, he has cause to consider himself the happiest man alive.

He decides not to go to church. Diana, he knows, does not intend to go, and the church service, with its make-shift choir and Mrs. Lamb's amazing accompaniment, are not sufficient in themselves to attract him there.

It is a glorious morning. The sun is shining brightly down, scattering the last remnants of the mountain mist, and a soft breeze is blowing from the west, and the whole hill is bathed in light. So after breakfast he takes a cigar, and strolls idly about the grounds, drinking in great draughts of the pure, fresh air.

Two ladies are strolling in the soft sunlight, protecting their weather-beaten visages with flimsy parasols. They are Mrs. Lamb and Mrs. Blewitt, both dressed in startling new apparel, with the evident

intention of creating an impression on the highly Christian congregation shortly to be assembled in the church. They see him in the distance, and bear down towards him like a couple of frigates in full sail.

'Good-morning, Mr. Grandby,' cries Mrs. Lamb, with pretty playfulness. 'A penny for your thoughts!'

At that moment he happens to be thinking how painfully plain the two ladies are looking, so in answering her he wisely tells a lie.

'I can hardly be said to have been thinking at all,' he answers. 'I was gazing at those distant mountain peaks, and my mind was in a state of dreamy vacuum.'

'Oh,' she says, with a little blush, 'I thought that—that you might have been thinking of—of something else. I suppose that you are coming to church. You know we have an anthem to-day, and I am going to sing a solo.'

He inwardly thanks his stars that he has decided not to go, but again he does not express his inmost thoughts aloud.

'What a pity!' he says, in a well-affected tone of regret. 'I had made an engagement for this morning to ride with Mr. Loftus to

Honeybank. May I ask what anthem you have selected?'

It is really wonderful to note how quickly he has acquired the social art of telling a deliberate falsehood, gracefully.

'It is a selection from the "Messiah"—chosen by myself,' she says, artlessly. 'They are all in different keys, but I intend to improvise a simple modulation between them—that is, if I can—I have never tried to do anything of the kind yet. Perhaps you might assist me, Mrs. Blewitt?'

'No—I regret that I am not talented that way,' says that lady, with a sly smile at Grandby. 'But you need not fret yourself, dear, about it. I am certain that you will be able to do it—you would never play in the way you do, unless you had a *very* peculiar ear for music.'

'You *dear* thing!' says Mrs. Lamb, bubbling over with pleasure. 'You must not believe all Mrs. Blewitt says, Mr. Grandby. She would make me out a veritable professor—a Rubinstein in petticoats. But I am not, I can assure you,' she adds, modestly. 'I am a very second-rate performer.'

'And you are going to sing a solo?'

'Yes—— "I know that my Redeemer liveth."'

He looks at her doubtfully.

'It is a little high, isn't it?' he ventures.

'Yes, it is,' she says. 'But then, I mean to play the top notes on the harmonium, and so help myself, you see.'

'Oh! I see—yes!' he answers, gravely, feeling that no power on earth could now induce him to enter the church that morning.

'And you won't come!' she says, appealingly.

'You had better go,' said Mrs. Blewitt, significantly. '*I*, for my part, wouldn't miss it for the world.'

'How nice of you to say so, dear!' cries Mrs. Lamb, in raptures.

'Ah! dear, you know how fond I am of hearing you sing,' says Mrs. Blewitt, sweetly.

'I am so glad to think, dear, that I am able to give you pleasure.'

'Yes, dear, your voice is certainly unique. I could listen to you for hours, without feeling bored.'

'Well—you have only to ask me any night in the lady's room, and I shall be only too happy to oblige.'

'How very kind of you, dear! You must sing to us to-morrow. I can't tell you what a positive treat it will be to me. Perhaps Mr. Grandby will come, too. I can vouch, Mr. Grandby, that you have *never* heard a voice like Mrs. Lamb's before.'

'Oh! my dear—how can you?' says Mrs. Lamb, with a modest blush. 'You make me feel quite ashamed. Mr. Grandby, my voice is really very small.'

'Ah! dear—it is the tone—the timbre—the execution which affects me so. I can never hear you sing without feeling inclined to leave the earth for ever, and go straight to heaven.'

'And you will certainly go there some day, dear,' says Mrs. Lamb, sweetly. 'And you will be a real ornament to the place too.'

'But I shall not be in the choir like you.'

'Who knows?' says Mrs. Lamb, with a sprightly little laugh. 'We shall all be equal there, you know—so probably you will have a voice like mine, then.'

'I would pray day and night on my bended knees, dear, if I thought that my voice would ever be like yours,' says Mrs. Blewitt, eyeing her affectionately; and then she lowers her parasol and looks at Grandby, and actually winks, and in so comical a manner that he finds himself compelled to turn away to hide his laughter.

The two ladies continue talking till it is time to go to church, and then they wish him *au-revoir*.

'Don't forget to-morrow, Mr. Grandby, in the lady's room.'

'I won't forget,' he answers, earnestly, carefully avoiding Mrs. Blewitt's eyes, for he feels that he will utterly collapse if he catches that sarcastic lady's glance. 'And afterwards we will have a little chat upon the balcony.'

'Yes—we will!' she murmurs, blushing crimson. 'Good-morning,' and, with a little bow, she moves away, accompanied by Mrs. Blewitt.

Grandby spends the morning in writing letters, his pressing engagement with Loftus being purely visionary. To ride down to Honeybank before lunch is the

very last thing that that indolent individual would think of doing.

At four o'clock he is wending his way towards the wood. How well he knows that little descending pathway now! Every tree and shrub, grassy mound and patch of fern or yellow balsam, is familiar to his eyes by this time, and he loves them all, for are they not all connected with his little sister-friend?

She has indeed chosen well the place of assignation. Never once, excepting the case of Loftus, have they been surprised. Down in the depths of that secluded wood, they might be cut off from the whole surrounding world, for all they see or hear of their fellow-creatures. And never once has he allowed his departure from the main road above to be observed! Acting always with the greatest caution, he has continued to walk ahead past the large projecting boulder, if perchance there were any pedestrians on the road—not retracing his steps until they were well out of sight. Ah! he is a clever fellow! He laughs softly to himself at the thought of his own cunning. It is delightful to think how completely he has hoodwinked all around him.

No one, save Loftus, has the least conception of his being other than he outwardly appears, and Loftus' discovery of his secret is really not to be wondered at, considering what an abnormally astute individual his friend is. It reflects no discredit on him, for having failed to keep *him* in the dark, for, in all matters pertaining to love and intrigue, his friend, he is well aware, is capable of seeing through a six-brick wall.

But it is highly gratifying to feel that, through his own adroitness, he has managed to deceive every other living soul. Only the night before, Mrs. Lamb had expressed her sympathy for the dulness of his life. She had told him how sorry she felt for him, living alone in that isolated hut, without friend or occupation. Oh! if she only knew the truth! What would be her opinion *then* as to the dulness of his life? In fact, as he walks along on this soft autumnal afternoon, carelessly switching his stick amongst the yellowing fern, he feels distinctly pleased with himself, in having conducted such a hazardous undertaking with such dexterity. What a happy chap he is! And what a change

has come upon him in the last few weeks! And it is to Diana that he owes this change—to dear, little innocent Diana, his sister-friend! How can he help loving her more and more? Is it to be wondered at that his love increases day by day? How can he ever repay her for her goodness, kindness, gentle influence, and love? Love her as he may, he feels that he can never requite her adequately for all that she has done to him. To the very last day of his life, the memory of her alluring little form will stand before him, reminding him of his debt.

There she is! Standing beneath the dear old, gnarled oak, clinging to its outstretched arm—a fairy little form, clad in the softest shade of grey, with a ruby-coloured flower resting lightly on her breast—smiling a smile of happy welcome. Oh! how supremely lovely she is looking! A sudden choking sensation rises in his throat, and he hurries towards her, and seizes her in his arms, and strains her to his breast, raining hot kisses on her upturned face.

'My little sister,' he whispers, 'my little love, are you better to-day? Has that horrid headache completely left you?'

'Yes—I am better—but not quite well yet,' she murmurs, placing her hands upon his chest, and attempting to extricate herself from his embrace. 'How can I feel ill, when you are near, Frank? Let me go, my darling boy, you are really hurting me!'

Reluctantly he looses his hold, and she sinks down upon the grass, inviting him by a gesture to follow her example.

'My aunt was so cross to-day,' she says, somewhat wearily. 'She tried my patience sorely. Nothing was right in her opinion, and everything was wrong.'

'She has been ill a long time now,' says Grandby.

'Ill! she is no more ill than you are or I am. It is simply indolence, combined with an hysterical craving to be considered interesting. Though, what the advantage is in being thought an invalid, I can't conceive.'

'But *nerves* play sad havoc with ladies' constitutions, you know,' he says, with a smile. 'As Loftus was saying to me the other day, if you really *imagine* you are in pain, you suffer as much as though it actually existed.'

'That is one way of looking at it, certainly,' she laughs. 'But I think it is a very idiotic argument. In my opinion, if any woman imagines anything so foolish, she ought to be locked up, and fed on bread and water, till her imagination becomes less vivid. I am sure that two days of that sort of treatment would cure my aunt for life. She would miss her beaf-steak and quart of bottled stout, I am thinking!'

'Then Mrs. Renfrew, in spite of her nerves, has a good appetite?' he asks, smiling.

'Appetite! Oh, Frank, I can assure you that, at times, I am quite ashamed. She lies on her sofa, bathed from top to toe in *eau-de-Cologne*, sighing and groaning, and at the same time eating like a navvy. She finishes more in a day than I eat in a week—and then she complains of being unable to eat a morsel. I heard her tell the doctor so this morning, and I felt inclined to laugh in her face. And he, poor man, prescribed for her quinine! If the tonic increases her appetite, I am convinced that the manager will refuse to board her at the usual rate.'

'Well, it is lucky for us that Mrs. Ren-

frew is attacked with nerves. Otherwise, we should never be able to meet with such regularity as we do now.'

'Oh! don't let's discuss her any more—I am sick to death of her whims and fancies. To change the subject, Frank, how is it that your friend—Mr. Grafton, has not yet put in his appearance?'

'What!—didn't I tell you? He has been compelled to postpone his visit. His *fiancée* has written to him, telling him that she is going into the Gullies for the next three weeks, so he has been compelled to choose the last three weeks. I am so very disappointed.'

'Oh, I am so sorry!' she says, with a sympathetic glance. 'But three weeks is not very long to wait.'

'No, it is not, certainly. But, do you know, Diana, I am beginning to feel very superstitious in the matter? I have, somehow, a presentiment that he will never come at all.'

'Never come at all!' she repeats, looking at him curiously. 'What makes you think that?'

'Oh! I do not know—I have no reason for it—it is merely a presentiment. I have

now been over two years in India, and, though we have done our utmost to effect a meeting, we have never yet succeeded. And now, when it did really seem on the point of coming about, it has again been frustrated. It seems as though Fate had ordained that we shall never meet.'

'What nonsense!' she cries, with a reassuring laugh. 'If his *fiancée* returns to Doonga, of course he will come as soon as he can. Of course it would be different if she didn't return, or—or if she were to break off the engagement. He would not come to the same place then—it would be too painful for him.'

'I wish to God she *would* break off the engagement!' he answers, gloomily; 'though it would be a dreadful blow to him. She is not worthy of him in any way. But there is no chance of her doing that—no woman who had once gained the love of such a man as George would wilfully reject it unless she were downright mad, or desperately wicked. He is such a grand creature that I cannot understand why she imposed upon him this six months' probation.'

'But he is very poor,' she ventures.

'Yes—he is poor—but what of that? If he was too poor to suit her tastes, why did she not refuse him at once? What could have been her reason for accepting him even in the conditional way she did?'

'Perhaps—perhaps—she might have thought that perhaps she—she might do better within the six months, and . . . and then . . .'

'Throw him over! Oh, it is impossible, Diana!' he cries, indignantly. 'Reserve him as a *pis-aller*—good, noble George! Such an idea is too monstrous—it makes my blood boil to think of it! Oh! surely none of your sex could be so inexpressibly vile as that?'

'I do not know,' she says, flushing crimson, and hiding her face in his shoulder. 'Do not let us talk about it—it makes me sad to think of the wickedness in this world.'

'Yes—you are right, Diana,' he replies softly, caressing her auburn hair; 'such things ought not to be even mentioned in your pure presence.'

Oh, what a perfect faith he has in her integrity! With her face hidden from view, a sudden huskiness rises in her throat,

as she thinks of her own unworthiness, for she loves him madly, passionately, with all the force of her impulsive nature, and she would give half her life to be able to wipe out the hideous past and appear before him pure and innocent. But the past alas! can never be obliterated!

> 'The painful records graven clear,
> On carven rock, or deathless page:
> The long unceasing reign of fear,
> The weary tale of lust and rage . . .'

must remain for ever—to the very eternity of time; for 'that which is done, not God himself can make undone.'

In another moment she has recovered her tranquillity. She has a fixed purpose to accomplish, and she has no time to lose. In another sixteen days George Grafton will appear to claim her as his bride; before that time has elapsed, it is imperative that she shall make Frank Grandby declare himself, for with her fierce passion, and keen, penetrating eye, she sees through the flimsy pretence of platonism, and knows that he loves her with a man's strong love. Her position is a desperate one, and she knows it. She cannot herself imagine what will be the ultimate outcome

of this intrigue. A web of complications has arisen around her, and she feels herself entangled in the meshes, powerless to extricate herself.

So she trusts blindly to Fate. If she can induce Frank Grandby to propose, she fancies that she may be able to sweep all obstacles away. She will write to Grafton begging her release, and swearing him to secrecy, and she will marry Grandby without his being aware of her previous engagement to his friend. But, that there are immense difficulties in the fulfilment of this scheme, she cannot conceal from herself. Will Grafton allow his friend to marry her without saying a single word? She does not know—she dare not think—all is terrible doubt and confusion in her brain—she feels herself being swept along on the rapid torrent of deceit, over hidden reefs and breakers, every moment going faster and faster with the lashing stream, and she is powerless to stop herself. She is in mid-water, amidst the boiling froth and foam, and she can only close her eyes and trust to fate to save her from the projecting rocks, and bring her safely home.

'What are you thinking of, Diana?' he

says, presently, glancing down at her averted face. 'You are very silent all of a sudden.'

'I was in the land of dreams,' she answers, softly, toying carelessly with his watch-chain. 'I was thinking whether you really told me true when you said that you had never been in love.'

'I told you nothing but the truth,' he answers, earnestly. 'My friends have often chaffed me on my seeming want of heart.'

'Ah! but, Frank dear, they were quite wrong if they put it down to want of heart. From what I know of you, I am sure that you are capable of loving very strongly, if you only chance to meet the right person. Am I not right?' she asks, looking up into his face.

'I really have not thought about it,' he answers, smiling. 'Nature has ordained that men should fall in love, and I don't suppose that I'm differently organised to the rest of the masculine world. I suppose I shall follow the usual example some day, but at present, my dear little Diana, I want nothing more than the love I bear you—though of a platonic——'

'Oh, Frank! What a lovely face!

She has opened the locket hanging on his watch-chain, and she is gazing down on the portrait of a girl, fresh and beautiful iu the full bloom of youth—a face of striking loveliness, with large, open, innocent eyes, and the suspicion of a dimple in either cheek.

'Oh, Frank! who is it?' she cries. 'Why do you carry it on your chain if—if you have never been in love?'

There is a trace of sharp anxiety in her tones, but he does not notice it. He looks steadily for a moment or two at the little portrait, and then he takes the locket from her hand and closes it.

'It is the portrait of my darling sister,' he says, gravely.

'Ah! forgive me, Frank, if I have caused you pain! I really did not know! Tell me about her, dear—I have often longed to ask you, for I know that she was very dear to you.'

He passes his hand across his forehead and sighs heavily.

'You are right, Diana,' he answers, sadly. 'She was very dear to me. From our very earliest childhood we had been

all in all to one another. I loved her with a love that few brothers bestow upon their sisters, and her love for me was equally extraordinary. As children we were never happy apart—and, as we gradually grew up, the strength of our love seemed to increase rather than to abate. Ah! Diana, no words of mine can express the agony I suffered when I heard that she was dead.'

'Then you were not beside her when she died?' she murmurs, gently closing her fingers on his hand.

'Beside her! How could I have been, Diana? But of course you do not know. No—I was in England when she died.'

'And where was she?'

'She was here—in India—in this cursed land of death. She had married the year preceding, and had come out here with her husband's regiment. She was married in July, and she died in the following June. It is a very sad story, Diana! By her gentle influence and goodness she had quite reclaimed the man she married from his former life of riot and debauchery. And when she died he went quite mad—lost all

self-respect and sense of honour, and met a fearful death some thirteen months afterwards in Kashmir. But Diana, darling, you are shivering. Are you cold?'

'No, not in the least,' she says, with a nervous little laugh. 'Was I shivering? I did not know it.'

'You were really—why did you not bring a wrap of some sort? The evenings are getting very chilly now.'

'Oh! never mind me, Frank dear,' she says, nestling against his shoulder. 'Go on telling me your story. It interests me deeply. How did your sister's husband meet his death?'

'His end was very terrible. I never knew the particulars till the other day, when I heard them all in detail. It happened that Loftus was with him when he died.'

'Loftus!'

The name escapes from her lips with a sudden cry, and looking up quickly at the sound he sees her regarding him with an expression of incredulous horror on her face, which has blanched to a deadly white.

'Diana!' he cries, fearfully, 'what is the matter? Tell me, darling, are you not

well? You look so terribly pale, you frighten me.'

He passes his arm around her waist, and looks anxiously down into her eyes. A shiver runs through her body, and she turns her head towards him, and buries it against his chest.

'I am not very well, Frank dear,' she murmurs, in a husky voice, with her face quite hidden from his searching gaze. 'It is only a—a passing pain in my head, dear—it will have gone in a minute.'

'But hadn't you better go home?' he asks, anxiously. 'It is not good for you to be out now, with the mist creeping up the hill.'

'No—no—let me stay, Frank,' she cries, pleadingly, nestling her head closer against his throbbing chest. 'Let me stay here in your dear arms. I shall soon be all right again. Go on talking, Frank, where you left off. Tell me all about your poor sister.'

'But are you sure, darling?' he says, doubtfully.

'Yes—yes—quite sure! It is only a sudden, shooting pain, and—and it will go away—perhaps—if—if you talk and occupy

my attention. Where was your sister buried, dear?'

'She was buried here, in the Doonga cemetery,' he whispers. 'She died here of typhoid fever. Loftus was up here living close by her, and, when she became ill, he telegraphed for her husband, and he came and nursed her for weeks and weeks, and —and then she died. Oh! Diana—my little sister—my heart breaks now when I think of what I have lost.'

'Frank—Frank!' she whispers, hoarsely. 'What was her name?'

'Adelaide!' he says, with solemn reverence, and, as he speaks, a convulsive shiver seizes her, causing him instinctively to tighten his clasp around her waist. 'Diana —you are not well—I know it!' he cries, with grave anxiety.

'I am only a—a little cold,' she says, huskily. 'But don't mind me—tell me more! What did you say of Mr. Loftus— I have quite forgotten.'

She speaks in a hurried nervous tone, which frightens him. He feels convinced that she is really ill.

'You must let me take you home,' he says, firmly. 'I will escort you to the road,

and then I will follow at a safe distance and see you safely to the house.'

'No, no, I won't go—not yet—not yet,' she cries, excitedly, still keeping her face concealed from view. 'You are very cruel, Frank, to try me so. I am interested in your story, and . . . and . . . I'

'If I tell you all you want to know,' he says, earnestly, trying to catch a glimpse of her dead-white face, 'will you promise me to go home at once?'

'Yes—yes—at once—at once,' she cries, with hysterical excitement. 'I will go at once, when you have told me all that Mr. Loftus said.'

He sees that, in spite of her sudden strange attack, she is resolved to remain until he has finished his recital, so he determines to humour her whim by complying with her request as quickly as he can, feeling that the sooner he satisfies her curiosity, the sooner he will be able to get her home.

'Mr. Loftus told me the whole story of my brother-in-law's death,' he says. 'He happened to be in Kashmir at the time, and he found my brother lying in his tent in a dying state. He had fallen over a precipice,

and had smashed himself to pieces. I told you, darling, that, after my sister's death, he went utterly to the bad. Loftus found a young girl kneeling by his bedside. She had followed him from Dooneya, and it was through her wicked thoughtlessness—curse her fair face!—that he met his death. She dared him to pick her——'

A wild, hysterical laugh breaks forth from her lips, freezing the very marrow in his bones.

'His name—his name!' she cries.

'My darling—my darling!' he whispers, growing pale with fear, 'you must come home at once—you are far from being——'

'His name—his name!'

'His name was Charlie Talbot, but I simply refuse——'

She breaks from his embrace, and staggers to her feet.

'Charlie Talbot!' she cries, with a burst of wild, discordant laughter. 'Your sister's husband! Ah! great God in heaven, I am going mad!'

Trembling with a nameless fear, he springs to his feet and tries to seize her in his arms.

'Do not touch me—keep off!' she cries,

stretching out her arms before her, as though to ward off some deadly blow. 'Ah! 'tis terrible—my brain is whirling round—my head is swimming—I cannot see—the wood revolves——'

Again the silence is startled by that same weird, discordant shriek, and then she throws up her arms, and falls with a spasmodic shudder a huddled mass upon the ground.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

LONDON: PRINTED BY DUNCAN MACDONALD, BLENHEIM HOUSE.

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